

OPERA OMNIA VOL. V

RAIMON PANIKKAR

BUDDHISM

VOLUME V



# **Opera Omnia**

*Volume V*

**Buddhism**

# Opera Omnia

## I. Mysticism and Spirituality

Part 1: Mysticism, Fullness of Life

Part 2: Spirituality, the Way of Life

## II. Religion and Religions

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## SERIES FOREWORD

All the writings it is my privilege and responsibility to present in this series are not the fruit of mere speculation but, rather, autobiographical—that is, they were first inspired by a life and praxis that have been only subsequently molded into writing.

This *Opera Omnia* ranges over a span of some seventy years, during which I dedicated myself to exploring further the meaning of a more justified and fulfilled human lifetime. I did not live for the sake of writing, but I wrote to live in a more conscious way so as to help my fellows with thoughts not only from my own mind but also springing from a superior Source, which may perhaps be called Spirit—although I do not claim that my writings are in any way inspired. However, I do not believe that we are isolated monads, but that each of us is a microcosm that mirrors and impacts the macrocosm of reality as a whole—as most cultures believed when they spoke of the Body of Śiva, the communion of the saints, the Mystical Body, *karman*, and so forth.

The decision to publish this collection of my writings has been somewhat trying, and more than once I have had to overcome the temptation to abandon the attempt, the reason being that, though I fully subscribe to the Latin saying *scripta manent*, I also firmly believe that what actually matters in the final analysis is to live out Life, as witnessed by the great masters who, as Thomas Aquinas remarks in the *Summa* about Pythagoras and Socrates (but not about Buddha, of whom he could not have known), did not write a single word.

In the twilight of life I found myself in a dark forest, for the straight path had been lost and I had shed all my certainties. It is undoubtedly to the merit of Sante Bagnoli, and of his publishing house Jaca Book, that I owe the initiative of bringing out this *Opera Omnia*, and all my gratitude goes to him. This work includes practically all that has appeared in book form, although some chapters have been inserted into different volumes as befitted their topics. Numerous articles have been added to present a more complete picture of my way of thinking, but occasional pieces and almost all my interviews have been left out.

I would like to make some practical comments which apply to all the volumes:

1. In quoting references, I have preferred to cite my previously published works following the general scheme of my publications.

2. Subject matter rather than chronology has been considered in the selection, and thus the style may sometimes appear uneven.

3. Even if each of these works aspires to be a self-sufficient whole, some ideas recur because they are functional to understanding the text, although the avoidance of unnecessary duplication has led to a number of omissions.

4. The publisher's preference for the *Opera Omnia* to be put into an organic whole by the author while still alive has many obvious positive features. Should the author outlive the printer's run, however, he will be hard put to help himself from introducing alterations, revisions, or merely adding to his original written works.

I thank my various translators, who have rendered the various languages I have happened to write in into the spirit of multiculturalism—which I believe is ever relevant in a world

where cultures encounter each other in mutual enrichment, provided they do not mislay their specificity. I am particularly grateful to Milena Carrara Pavan, to whom I have entrusted the publication of all my written works, which she knows deeply, having been at my side in dedication and sensitivity during the last twenty years of my life.

*R.P.*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### *Hindū Scriptures*

<i>AA</i>	<i>Aitareya Aranyaka</i>
<i>AB</i>	<i>Aitareya-brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>AbbK</i>	<i>Abhidharmakośa</i>
<i>AbbKBh</i>	<i>Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya</i>
<i>Acts</i>	<i>Acts of the Apostles</i>
<i>Am</i>	<i>Amos</i>
<i>AN</i>	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>
<i>AstPrajPar</i>	<i>Aṣṭasāhasriskā Prajñāpāramitā</i>
<i>AV</i>	<i>Atharva-veda</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>BG</i>	<i>Bhagavad Gītā</i>
<i>Bod</i>	<i>Bodhicaryāvatāra</i>
<i>BSBh</i>	<i>Brahmā Sūtra Upaniṣad</i>
<i>BU</i>	<i>Bṛhadāranyaka-upaniṣad</i>
<i>Col</i>	<i>Colossians</i>
<i>1 Chr</i>	<i>First Book of Chronicles</i>
<i>1 Cor</i>	<i>First Corinthians</i>
<i>2 Cor</i>	<i>Second Corinthians</i>
<i>CU</i>	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Deut</i>	<i>Deuteronomy</i>
<i>Dh</i>	<i>Dhammapaḍa</i>
<i>DharmSamg</i>	<i>Dharmasaṃgraha</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
<i>Dn</i>	<i>Book of Daniel</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dictionary of Spirituality</i>
<i>DW</i>	<i>Deutsche Werke (Meister Eckhart)</i>
<i>Eccl</i>	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>
<i>Eph</i>	<i>Ephesians</i>
<i>Ex</i>	<i>Exodus</i>
<i>Ez</i>	<i>Ezekiel</i>
<i>Gal</i>	<i>Galatians</i>
<i>Gen</i>	<i>Genesis</i>
<i>GopB</i>	<i>Gopatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>Hab</i>	<i>Habakkuk</i>
<i>Heb</i>	<i>Hebrews</i>
<i>Hos</i>	<i>Hosea</i>



<i>Isa</i>	<i>Isaiah</i>
<i>Iti</i>	<i>Itivuttaka</i>
<i>JaimB</i>	<i>Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>Jas</i>	<i>James</i>
<i>Jer</i>	<i>Jeremiah</i>
<i>Jn</i>	<i>Gospel according to John</i>
<i>1 Jn</i>	<i>First John</i>
<i>Job</i>	<i>Job</i>
<i>Judg</i>	<i>Judges</i>
<i>KāthU</i>	<i>Kāthā Upaniṣad</i>
<i>KausU</i>	<i>Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad</i>
<i>KenU</i>	<i>Kena Upaniṣad</i>
<i>1 Kings</i>	<i>First Book of Kings</i>
<i>2 Kings</i>	<i>Second Book of Kings</i>
<i>Lam</i>	<i>Lamentations</i>
<i>Lev</i>	<i>Leviticus</i>
<i>Lk</i>	<i>Gospel according to Luke</i>
<i>LS</i>	<i>Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra</i>
<i>LW</i>	<i>Lateinische Werke (Meister Eckhart)</i>
<i>MaitU</i>	<i>Maitrī Upaniṣad</i>
<i>MandU</i>	<i>Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Manu</i>	<i>Mānava- Dharmaśāstra</i>
<i>MhBh</i>	<i>Mahābhārata</i>
<i>MbparibS</i>	<i>Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra</i>
<i>MbvagVP</i>	<i>Māhavagga Vinaya Piṭaka</i>
<i>Mic</i>	<i>Micah</i>
<i>Mil</i>	<i>Milindapañha</i>
<i>MK</i>	<i>Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā</i>
<i>Mk</i>	<i>Gospel according to Mark</i>
<i>MKV</i>	<i>Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā Vṛtti (Prasannapadā)</i>
<i>MN</i>	<i>Majjhima Nibāya</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa</i>
<i>Mt</i>	<i>Gospel according to Matthew</i>
<i>MundU</i>	<i>Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad</i>
<i>NBh</i>	<i>Nyāya Bhāṣya</i>
<i>NDS</i>	<i>New Dictionary of Spirituality</i>
<i>NirS</i>	<i>Nirdeśa Sūtra</i>
<i>Num</i>	<i>Book of Numbers</i>
<i>PED</i>	<i>Pāli-English Dictionary</i>
<i>1 Pet</i>	<i>First Peter</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Greek Patrology</i>
<i>Phil</i>	<i>Philippians</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Latin Patrology</i>

<i>PraPas</i>	<i>Prasannapadā (Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā Vṛtti)</i>
<i>PrasnU</i>	<i>Pratna Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Pr</i>	<i>Book of Proverbs</i>
<i>Ps</i>	<i>Book of Psalms</i>
<i>PTS</i>	<i>Pāli Text Society</i>
<i>PTSS</i>	<i>Pāli Text Society Summarized</i>
<i>PTST</i>	<i>Pāli Text Society Translation Series</i>
<i>PVB</i>	<i>Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>Qo</i>	<i>Qoeleth (Ecclesiastes)</i>
<i>Rev</i>	<i>Book of Revelation</i>
<i>Rom</i>	<i>Romans</i>
<i>RV</i>	<i>Rg-veda</i>
<i>SadDharmPundS</i>	<i>Saddharma Puṇḍarika Sūtra</i>
<i>1 Sam</i>	<i>First book of Samuel</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>Satapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>SBB</i>	<i>Sacred Book of the Buddhists</i>
<i>SBE</i>	<i>Sacred Book of the East</i>
<i>Sir</i>	<i>Sirach</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Saṃyutta Nikāya</i>
<i>SNi</i>	<i>Sutta Nipāta</i>
<i>SU</i>	<i>Śvetāvatara Upaniṣad</i>
<i>SuS</i>	<i>Śūraṅgama Sūtra</i>
<i>SV</i>	<i>Sāma Veda</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>2 Tim</i>	<i>Second Timothy</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Taittiriya Saṃhitā</i>
<i>TU</i>	<i>Taittiriya Upaniṣad</i>
<i>U</i>	<i>Upaniṣad</i>
<i>Ud</i>	<i>Udāna</i>
<i>UdVag</i>	<i>Udāna Varga</i>
<i>Vak</i>	<i>Vākyapadiya</i>
<i>VisMag</i>	<i>Visuddhi Magga</i>
<i>Vivek</i>	<i>Vivekacūḍāmaṇi</i>
<i>VP</i>	<i>Vinaya Piṭaka</i>
<i>WES</i>	<i>Wisdom of the East Series</i>
<i>Wis</i>	<i>Book of Wisdom</i>
<i>Ya</i>	<i>Yasna</i>
<i>YS</i>	<i>Yoga Sūtra</i>
<i>YSBh</i>	<i>Yoga Sūtra Bhāṣya</i>
<i>Zech</i>	<i>Zechariah</i>
<i>Zeph</i>	<i>Zephaniah</i>

*For the texts in Pāli, unless otherwise specified the citations refer to the Pāli Text Society and the Pāli Text Society Translation Series.*



## INTRODUCTION

This book is not a treatise on historical Buddhism or its various schools, but focuses instead on its main message.\*

It is an almost impossible undertaking to try and condense twenty-six centuries of a rich history during which the Buddha's teachings almost spontaneously developed, but I will attempt at least to outline their spirit.

By way of introduction to Buddhist apophatism, I will resort to an ancient legend.

### The Myth

We owe this splendid legend to a famous Chinese monk of the seventh century (Xuanzang, 602–664) who made a pilgrimage to India in search of original Buddhist texts and to rediscover the true spirit of the Buddha. This legend is set in Bodhgayā, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment.

No one has ever succeeded in giving a precise description of the Enlightened One. In early Buddhist iconography, a lotus blossom, a sieve, symbolic animals, or even an empty throne or the imprint of his feet was used to represent the Buddha. The first, partial, and fearful attempts at representing the Buddha were made even though for the early Buddhists it was inconceivable that the Enlightened One could be made manifest to the common eye.

We know that it needed the daring of Greeks, using the *ghandaran* art form, to overcome the pure transcendence of Buddha.

Let us now come to the legend itself. Once there was a brahmin who was bold enough to conceive a desire to fashion a statue of Śākyamuni. He set the condition that he should be left alone in the temple until a certain day without disturbance from anyone. He was humored in this, but the brahmin's request was so unusual that the people could not contain their impatience. So some people stole into the temple before the appointed time; much to their amazement, there was no trace of the brahmin, but a statue was found. This had been left unfinished, but it was recognized at once as the image of the Buddha, as evidenced by numerous Chinese inscriptions and later reproductions.

Such a legend is not unique nor without parallels. Buddhism itself offers similar themes, but the theme of incompleteness is also an inexhaustible theme in the history of almost all religions.

### Interpretation

If the reader could somehow relive on his own the whole development implicit in the legend, hermeneutics would not be needed. While fully realizing the weakness of such a claim, I would still like to attempt to sketch an interpretation of the myth.

---

\* Revised version of *The First Image of Buddha*, partly published in *Kerygma und Indien. Das erste Bild des Buddha*, pp. 91–100, published in Italian as *La prima immagine del Buddha* (Brescia: Humanitas, 1966), 608–22. Translated into English by James MacDonald.

Giving up on any scholarly apparatus, I would like to attempt an explanation truly consonant with the religious spirit of Buddhism, but without being alien to Christianity and, hopefully, remaining intelligible for the Western reader.

To give a precise order to the theme, I will divide my interpretation into several categories.

a. *Spatiality (topology) and temporality (chronorhythms)*. Religious experience is not independent of place. The mystical experience can transcend time and space; however, it must necessarily have its origin in a given place and time. Some places are holy. Pilgrimage has a meaning, and even the Absolute "chose" a place.

The myth takes place precisely where the Buddha received his illumination, under the fig tree, in a specific place that is also connected with vegetative life. But the brahmin does not just go there; he also enters a sacred place: the exterior and the interior spaces are both necessary. They are the principles of a religious topology.

There is a season for everything. There is a universal cosmic rhythm, the contemplation of which possibly represents the main feature of human wisdom. This rhythm has two beats: one inherent to events and the other to action. The first aspect has a cosmic dimension, while the second is centered on Man, and both highlight two of the dimensions of a single and identical rhythm. It is a specifically human task to harmonize these two aspects. Peace, concord, serenity, and such are religious values that can only be attained when these two dimensions are harmonized.

The myth narrates an event that did not occur immediately after the *mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, but sometime later, following a period of failure, silence, and impotence. All this cannot have happened simultaneously. Until then, reproducing Buddha's image had not only been disallowed but it had not even been remotely thought possible. Action also entails time. The sculptor needs a certain amount of effort to carve his work, and sets aside a certain period of time in advance. Once again, we encounter exterior and interior notions of time. These are the principles of a religious chronorhythms.

b. *Solitude*. Religion unites us with God and humankind, and even the whole of creation, which is essentially a community but is endowed, for this very reason, with a peculiar dimension of solitude and isolation. It is precisely because this communion is so intimate that it must have deep roots and therefore be grounded in solitude in order to grow.

And so our brahmin goes into the temple, alone and undisturbed, and shuts the door after him.

c. *Respect*. Religion affects the whole Man. There is nothing merely approximate about it, nothing marginal, and it is not a secondary occupation. Without an awareness of distance and diversity, there is no approaching the Absolute.

The brahmin was also a pilgrim seeking authority and bound by his Rule; the guardians of the temple supported him. The goal he strove for was certainly novel and the undertaking rash, but it was hardly revolutionary. A prophet does not start from scratch but builds on tradition, so that it may endure.

d. *Commitment*. Without total abandon, without being disposed without prejudice to give and to renounce everything, no religious experience can be reached. From a purely morphological point of view, there is a difference between an authentic religious experience and all other kinds of experience. Religious experience puts life itself in jeopardy, and necessarily so, since it is by definition the experience that puts at stake the ultimate goal—life itself—irrespective of personal views. Art, science, politics, love, and so forth are in themselves on a different plane from the religious, even though an authentic religious experience may take the form of one of these "intra-mundane" experiences. In a sense, we

could say that no object is exclusively religious, but that there is a multiplicity of religious phenomena.

The brahmin's adventure was not a game, nor a purely artistic matter, but an undertaking involving life and death. Consecration is a fundamental religious category.

c. *Communion*. With this category, we are getting close to the three basic characteristics highlighted in our myth.

Religious experience is always an experience of communion. God may be thought of in one way or another, and may even be denied. The authentic religious experience, however, always remains that of communion: Man enters into God; Man loses himself in the Supreme; one reaches that state in which "two" loses its meaning; the union is such that no room remains for separation; there is no place for "two." As the famous *sūfi* legend so aptly puts it, "Who are you?" asked the Voice, when the Lover after long years of ascetic preparation knocked on the door of the Beloved. "It is so-and-so" was the answer, and so the door remained shut—until the third time, after even more years of solitude and preparation, to the same question, "Who are you?" the reply came, "I am you," and the door opened.

Contact with Divinity means a total exchange. One goes toward the Divine, or enters the Divine, rises to the Divine, or loses oneself in the Divine, depending on the theoretical conceptions one holds.

Why should our brahmin ever wish to picture the Buddha, if not to render him "present," contemporary, and thus be able to touch him, or truly become one with him? Such a desire was unheard of, and yet it was the highest possible religious entreaty. From a Buddhist point of view, it is impossible to ask questions about the essence of *nirvāṇa*: Man cannot speak of God, and the spirit must be left totally free from conceptual contents. However, all this does not mean that communion with the Absolute is beyond our reach, but only that the way it happens is not and cannot be purely creatural. Such a communion cannot be realized by the intellect, the will, or the body. The Creator and His creatures as such cannot be One, but somehow communion must occur. On this point there is convergence among all the formulas: God becomes Man, Man becomes God, the Creator and the creature meet, and this point of union will be variously called Nothingness, heaven, *brahman*, *nirvāṇa*, Buddha, Christ.

The brahmin is no longer there; he is transformed. Communion means transformation; otherwise it is not real. The legend does not tell us the Brahman melted into nothingness, but precisely that he was transformed! Only that which not really *is* can vanish. *Appearance* disappears, and is replaced by *apparition*. What is hidden to the senses is unveiled to faith. To the outsider, this can be like magic. Without faith, none of it has any sense. Nevertheless, one can explain color to a blind person by talking about the various wavelengths that are radiated by matter.

f. *Imperfection and provisionality*. Buddhist tradition has always seen any unfinished statue of the Buddha as that of *Maitreya*, the Buddha who is to come. Here any number of different motives are tangled together: movement, temporality, imperfection, original sin, redemption, hope, compassion, and so forth.

The statue remains unfinished. The statue is of Buddha, but the Buddha is not yet wholly there; he is still to come, or rather to come back. All is in motion and falls under the sign of expectation and hope. The journey is not complete, and the present goal is yet to be reached; everything is in progress—but what "already is" is more than a mere sign.

The Brahman is no more; the whole Buddha is not yet here; there is only the one who is coming, who is to come. But this, too, can be explained: the impatience of those who were waiting and, in their excessive haste, opened the door of the temple. A sin has been committed.

Fulfillment has been denied because Men did not want to wait and did not heed the rhythm of "becoming." The consequences might have been far worse, since at least an unfinished statue remains. "He will come again, for how could the image be completed" without him? The goal to fulfill is now known; it is to be found, so to speak, right under our eyes, but there is no one who can complete the task; the brahmin is no more.

All religions are in agreement upon this point: a task remains to be carried out, a redemption is necessary because humankind has lost an opportunity and a sin has been committed. Now human history must run its course so that he—the *Maitreya*, the Redeemer, He who is to come—may come again. Religion is both powerful and powerless: powerful because it alone offers a chance of salvation, but at the same time powerless, for it neither owns nor can it effect salvation (this idea would debase religion to the level of magic). Religion must be content with just providing a meeting place, making itself available, because salvation can only come directly from the Savior. All the differences between religions are about the *how*.

g. *Apophatism*. The brahmin is not in the temple anymore; he has disappeared, but on the other hand, the Buddha, who is still to come, is not there either. The statue that was left there is neither the brahmin nor the Buddha. It may have incorporated the Brahman and it may allude to the Buddha, but for the time being, it is impossible to catch a glimpse or an intimation of either the brahmin or the Buddha. The incompleteness of the image, the imperfect symbol, has swallowed up immanence and betrayed transcendence.

This is the enactment of a grandiose turn of events. In the beginning, the first centuries of Buddhist history saw the Buddha's transcendence alleged and, we might paradoxically add, "represented" by the absence of figurative and conceptual symbols. It was not permitted to "reflect" on God, *nirvāṇa*, and thus on the Buddha, for the Absolute is not *ob-jectum*: it is not something that is thrown in our way. And is not total absence the best, indeed the only category of transcendence? Here it is undoubtedly a question not just of considering "Being" or "God" as Non-Being or Non-God, but, for that very reason, excluding and abandoning any kind of consideration or indeed nonconsideration.

Historical Buddhism and, more to the point, our myth itself tell us that a portrait of the Master was nonetheless desired. The legend also reveals that the statue was recognized as an image of the Buddha. Indeed, centuries before *ghandaran* art produced images of him, the sacred books had described the Buddha's physical characteristics down to the smallest detail (thirty-two *mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇa*, or marks of the great man, and eighty secondary features). An artificial representation had only to follow the established canon. What this means is that, before the outward representation saw the light, there already existed an interior portrait.

The invisible Buddha whose exact description was preexistent now appeared on the empty throne. However, the interior image cannot be seen and thus preserves its transcendence somehow intact. As long as the inner eye is locked in contemplation, not only are religious feelings satisfied, but the accusation that a sin against transcendence has been committed will not even be sustainable. But, once creative imagination has been moved to act, the flow becomes unstoppable. Our myth, however, salvages the quintessence of Buddhism and with it an authentic religious value, perhaps the quintessence of all religions: the *ab-solute*<sup>1</sup> or, in other words, transcendence.

Written sources attest that copies were made from the original image. Therefore it was not the living Buddha! Yet it was the true image of Siddhārtha, born in the gardens of Lumbini. Transcendence is too powerful to hide for long within our heart; it must somehow break

<sup>1</sup> From Latin: being free (*solutus*) from (*ab*) everything [ed.].

out and shine through. Every artist knows this, even though what we have here is a superior "art," a religious revelation.

The Buddha could no longer hide and had to show himself, but every apparition could not but deal a lethal blow to his sublimity and transcendence. An image, albeit a mere representation of something else, refers nonetheless to a precise object and thereby attests that, somewhere out there, the object it refers to exists and can be found. An image is like a weapon aimed at a target with a precision that corresponds to its perfection; it is enough to release the trigger to reach the target, but with this release, pure transcendence ceases to be. Through his image and within it, the Buddha is somehow present and thus no longer missing. But the myth here preserves the most profound nucleus of Buddhism: transcendence without compromise, and the sublimity of the Absolute.

Still, the brahmin has disappeared. The Buddha's presence may be real only when the man is no longer there. The presence of the Buddha is offset by self-oblivion on the part of the brahmin. The Supreme Being *is*—provided that He *is*—only for his own sake. If I am there, then He cannot be: there is no room for two. The divine epiphany is not a manifestation *for* us, that can only be based on our imagination. God does not stage shows, because there are no spectators; we are rather more like players. The being of God, so to speak, is totally invisible, for it has no external stage from which it may be contemplated; He does not *ek-sist*<sup>2</sup> because nothing can be outside of Him.

Buddhism defends the authentic and extreme apophatism of Being. Being cannot be uttered (except by itself!). In contemplating Being and reflecting on the Absolute, the question arises: *who* is the agent of this operation? My ego is the subject, so it seems obvious that I cannot *comprehend* the Absolute, not just because I lack the necessary cognitive power, but because my ego cannot have an ontic basis outside of Being, from where Being could be objectified, desired, or represented. In other words, it is only when I am not there that the Supreme Being can be present. The Buddha's presence is possible only through the brahmin's absence. We are obstacles in the way of God and divine manifestation. "He came to His own, and His own did not accept Him" (Jn 1:11), because they could not receive Him until He had made them into the children of God, reborn in God. Only God can receive God.

In the beginning, the legend recounts, Man could not depict the image of the Buddha (because humanity was too "self-aware," we could add as an explanation). Later, the image of the Buddha progressively assumed an interior form, but this could only be a transitory stage. Ultimately, the image became manifest and swallowed up Man, and mature Buddhism was born. But the story goes further, and such a "snapshot" moment could not last very long. The myth has an answer to this as well. Not for nothing is it a pilgrim who recounts the legend, and the brahmin himself was also a pilgrim.

The brahmin had vanished, but people were still there. This is why the image of the Buddha was unfinished. For the brahmin, who was totally absent, the Buddha was pure presence; for the others, he was partly present and partly absent, in the same measure as the observers were present or absent to themselves. When one realizes that one is meditating, it is not true mediation anymore, as most—not only Buddhist—schools of spirituality agree.

Moreover, the presence-absence of the Buddha represents the fundamental structure of hope. The image of the statue of Bodhgayā is that of *Maitreya*, the Buddha who is to come, the Buddha of hope. This statue is just an anticipation, just a sign of him who is to come. Thus we *are* insofar as we hope. But we can only hope *to be*: our hope is essentially directed

<sup>2</sup> From Greek: to lean outside.



toward being and only toward being. We hope to be whatever we "will be," or rather "being" without the "will," since the "will be" is precisely the dimension of the hope of a wandering existence, which exists as long as it is hopeful. In hope the Absolute is both present and absent. If it was not present, there would be no hope, but nothing; if it was not absent at the same time, there would be no hope, but only Being.

We can still go one step further in a strictly Buddhist sense and claim that not only do we exist as long as we hope, but that all being is only hope, for once hope is gone and being is achieved, the being that will "cease to be for anyone" will cease to be "being." The apophatism of Being is not only an expression of theoretical knowledge or a purely dialectical weapon, but also the ultimate nature of the Absolute. That is the reason why the Buddha always refused to account for it; his silence was its highest revelation.

Here, once again, the myth abounds in meaning: the statue is silent, it does not speak—but it speaks only to those who know how to be silent. In a different religious context, an image that has incorporated a man would surely speak and become part of that human nature of which the West is so proud! Nothing similar is to be found in Buddhism. *Maitreya* does not speak but smiles with serene seriousness, and remains silent with open eyes that seem to see all, but are actually fixed on infinity. This situation should not be interpreted as if the lack of speech by the statue had to do with its being made of stone, that is, not as if the real Buddha spoke and only his stone copy did not. I have deliberately used the word "image" rather than "copy" until now. The statue is silent just as the Buddha is; it is not a copy, but rather an icon.

### Reflection

If we look upon the image of the Buddha with a deconsecrated gaze, we will merely see a statue that it may even be tempting to "save" by locking it up in a museum. This modern way of seeing things is no longer the monopoly of the West; a chill and arid wind is everywhere blowing away the warmth and vividness of the myth, and, of course, killing it. In times of crisis, the sword of philosophy and the knife of theology are needed to prolong the life of myths through surgical interventions, so that the myth can penetrate deeply enough to reach into a human structure perhaps hitherto inaccessible, and thus bring Man back to life in all his integrity.

The mystical experience of Buddhism appears to me as follows. The ultimate reality is, not only for us, but of itself, ineffable, because any expression of it is necessarily derived. To the ineffability of the mystical experience corresponds its "nonreality." (This is precisely the radical consequence of realism pushed to extremes.) I cannot say anything regarding ultimate reality, because it is nothing. Buddhism does not exactly assert that the Absolute is nothing, or that there is not "anything" in general terms, but that no *being* corresponds to that "something"; there is no *is*. Thus, it would be a complete falsification of Buddhism to pretend that it asserts that we must *think* of the Absolute as Nothing; the Absolute cannot be thought, for it would be necessary to think of it as Being or Non-Being, and the Absolute "is not" the former nor the latter.

Moreover, Buddhist renunciation is not only confined to thought, representation, or the will, but also being itself, Man's being or the Being that lives in Man. Therefore, I do not say that I "know" there is "something," but that, since it transcends all my faculties, I cannot and should not think or will "it." There is more. If being is not the ultimate, I must also learn how to renounce being. If I remained attached to being, or rather, if being remained attached to itself, it would not reach the final, ultimate state. However, this is beyond what

can be expressed, for the final stage beyond being is in actual fact no being whatsoever and cannot therefore become the object of any operation; not even trusting that something like that can be "given" has any meaning. A final stage cannot be "given." Ineffability is authentic.

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The first section of the book begins with a reflection on the concept of emptiness and fullness in the Buddhist tradition (chapter 1) in comparison with the same concept in the Hindū and Christian traditions. It then continues with an ancient Buddhist legend, contrasting it with the current technological civilization (chapter 2), and ends with a more specific chapter on the interpretation of the Buddha's silence (chapter 3).

The second section gives a systematic study, *The Silence of Buddha*, which responds to the modern-day approach to life defined as "religious atheism."



**SECTION I**  
**INTRODUCTORY ASPECTS OF BUDDHISM**



## VOID AND FULLNESS IN THE BUDDHIST, HINDŪ, AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

### *Śūnya—Pūrṇa—Plērōma*

I am expected to give a philosophical introduction.\* An introduction it will be, because it will not enter into the profundities of these three words. It is philosophical—in the real sense of the word: philosophy is as much the love of wisdom as the wisdom of love. Perhaps one of the signs of the crisis of modern times is that philosophy has become a matter of the brain, *opus rationis*, and left subordinated another part that is as essential, as fundamental, and as indispensable: love. Anything human includes the heart, what we may call awareness, intellect, *sat*, *cit*, and *bhkti*—*ānanda* as well.

I would like to comment very briefly on the meaning of the three words—the Mahābhārata says that every three things are perfect.

Three words have called us here together. Three words have allured us to come here to share our experiences and our respective insights. Three words, not three concepts. There are dozens of concepts of *śūnyatā*, *plērōma*, and all the rest. What attracted us is the power hidden in these three words, not barren discussions with concepts. A concept is only valid there where it has been conceived, and not outside that particular field. And we are precisely here transgressing the different fields of the different human traditions of the world. A concept is a construct, it is our creation. A concept is not an object of experience. It is an object of rational abstraction. I cannot experience the concept of horse; I can experience my horse or a particular horse. We want to stress the experiential level.

Not three concepts are the objects of our discussions, but three symbols. The word is not only a sign, it is not only a concept, it entails a concept, and we can draw from the word many concepts. The word is a symbol, and therefore polysemic. A symbol is not an objectifiable reality. A symbol is not an object. A symbol includes the subject for whom the symbol is symbol as much as the object that we may somewhat point out as a part of the symbol. The symbol and the symbolic awareness is a hidden chapter that I cannot unfold here. Such symbolic awareness is needed precisely in our times, which for too long has been simply enthused by modern science, which is the colossal and genial production of concepts, not of symbols. The symbol reveals, besides, that the symbol (Greek: *symballein*, "together") is what brought us together, that is precisely the power of the symbol, which in itself should be *svayamprakāśa* (self-effulgent). A symbol does not need a hermeneutic, for that by means of which I explain and interpret the symbol that would be the real symbol. And the crisis of our times is that we have almost lost this symbolic awareness: something

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\* Original text in Void and Fullness in the Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian Traditions: Śūnya—Pūrṇa—Plērōma, ed. B. Bäumer and J. R. Dupuche (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 2005), 11–18, 267–75. Opening speech of the seminar held in December 1999 at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, in Sarnāth, Varanasi, organized by the Abhishikṣānanda Society, chaired by Raimon Panikkar, and concluded in the presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

that for an ancestor of ours put him or her into an interrelationship with reality has lost its power of attraction and needs to be explained. Now, to explain a symbol is to explain it away. The symbol reveals the symbolized in the symbol itself, not outside, transcending thus the dichotomy between subjectivism and objectivism. The symbol is a matter of experience. And the three words have the power to symbolize precisely the most profound experience of the three great religious traditions. These three symbols are used predominantly, not exclusively.

Three symbols—*śūnya*—*pūrṇa*—*Plērōma*—symbolize what?

There are many symbols, but the three symbols that, to me and I think to most of us, are characteristic of the three great human traditions living in our times, and in crisis also in our times, are symbols of the Ultimate: *aprapaṇca*, *nirvikalpa*, *acintya*, and *avivādyā*—ineffable, beyond verbal designation, beyond thought-construct, inconceivable, what cannot be known otherwise. I could have also quoted words from *Mādhyamika* texts.

Then how is it that we speak of that which is unconceivable, ineffable? Surely, we cannot have a concept of that. But the symbol approaches us, lets us touch reality in a very personal and I would say even unique way, because it is fruit of an experience. Three symbols of the Ultimate. And here is the challenge, and that is why the atmosphere we want to create is essential to our discussions; better, to our being together. Knowledge, even in the sense of *jñāna*, will not lead us to the deep symbolic awareness, *avidyā*—ignorance, much less, obviously. I would put it into words, in philosophical jargon: the awareness of an absence is the knowledge of a presence, which is not what it appears to be. But if I take away that absence, if I take the appearance, the whole thing disappears. What is this absence? To put it in poor and simple words, this absence is emptiness, is fullness, is completeness. But the way of approaching can only be an experiential way. We are looking for that ultimate—and here the cross-cultural reflection is essential: why am I looking for *śūnyatā*? Why am I interested in *pūrṇatā*? Or why do I think that *plērōm* is the symbol of the Ultimate, of what it is all about? Because we start our search, our pilgrimage within a field—that is, the mythos—that makes us believe that here is meaning in this direction, not in another direction. In that field is where we hope to find “it,” “that thing,” not outside. So, there are different ways. If I were to make a caricature out of this cross-cultural reflection, I would say: We are looking for happiness of all sentient beings, for the elimination of *duḥkha*. Nothing satisfies us. All is full with dissatisfaction. Thus, I am looking for eliminating all the obstacles, and therefore the higher obstacle is *taṇhā*, *trṣṇā*, thirst, desire, ambition, or whatever we want to call it. I am looking in the direction toward emptiness, because all the other things do not satisfy. Or we are suffering from the fragmentation of our knowledge. The *Upaniṣad* asks, “What is that, knowing which everything is known?” This is the contrary of present-day—science: which knows more and more particular things and less and less about the whole. The obstacle is ignorance. So we are looking for wholeness, for *pūrṇatā*, because being full of this *vidyā*, full of this desire to know *brahman*—*brahmajijñāsa*—which is so full that even when we take out the full, the full remains.

Is there another way to look? We discover ourselves imperfect, inachieved, longing for perfection, sinful, aware of our imperfections. Here sin, fragmentation, is the obstacle. We look for fullness. We ask, Do the three symbols symbolize the same? Or are we looking for different things? These three human pilgrimages are meaningful and can be explained if we understand the three different fields in which centuries of reflection have taken place.

Today’s hermeneutics says that no text is understandable without a context. We should today learn precisely from the experience of others and perhaps also from the misinterpretations and failures of others. I introduce a third element in the knowledge of a text: I know the text well. I have studied the context enough. But if I am not immersed, plunged in the

experience from where the text has emerged, in spite of all my Indological knowledge, philosophical acumen, I have to know the "pretext" of the author. And here it is where experience is important. And touching one another is important, something that is more subtle. Beyond and besides knowing the text I have to know the context and the pretext that has led the author to write that text, which has a meaning in that context. And the pretext is the socio-historical-economic concrete situation of a particular author, which is in one place or another. Without knowing this pretext, which I can only know if I know the person directly or the representative of that tradition firsthand, I will not be able to decipher the text.

But the question remains: do they symbolize the same?

The question is unavoidable. Allow me to say "yes," to say "no," to say "neither." The modern crypto-Kantianism, which has invaded also the Eastern minds, makes us believe that yes, we speak of the same thing, as if the *noumenon*, the "thing in itself," were existing. We say, we are speaking about the same thing, forgetting that my speech about that thing, like the ways that lead to the mountain, belong also to the mountain. If I take all the ways to the peak, the peak will collapse. There is an *a priori* that this *noumenon*, this "thing in itself," exists. And we speak then about the Ultimate. Now, this Ultimate, by its very nature, cannot have a further point of reference that will allow me to say "it is the same" or "it is not the same." How can I say "it is the same" or "it is not the same" if I do not have a canvas behind the Ultimate that allows me to say "they are the same" or "they are not the same"? Thus, the paradoxical language of the mystics. That is the whole difficulty, which, if one is not in the context and does not know the pretext, one is not able to understand the text. Do they speak of the same? I am not sure that this "same" exists. If we say that the "same" is not a concept, and the experience is the personal reenactment of something integral in a psycho-historical reality, perhaps this Kantian thinking itself is a way of approach, but in these ultimate problems it does not help.

If we say "no," we are in chaos, sheer plurality, total relativism, impossibility of contact. You have your thing, I have my thing, and if you are powerful I will have to tolerate you, and if you are not powerful, I will try to eliminate you. So, "neither-nor." Are we coming together to speak about the same thing? Harmony does not mean that we all say the same thing. Are we then saying something totally different, and we respect each other, because you have your language and I don't understand what you say?

Here I betray my bias if I say that the *advaita* approach may offer us a key—not to understand, because *advaita* is not totally understandable with the intellect that just points to say "this" or "that"—but it overcomes the dialectical dilemma that either we speak about the same or we do not speak about the same: neither-nor. I have introduced the notion of homeomorphic equivalents or analogy of third degree in order to facilitate bridges of mutual understanding and entering into a certain type of communion and communication.

But let me continue the same type of argument trying to show that I cannot know whether I say the same or I say a different thing. How can we know if the Ultimate has no further point of reference? Here is the place of pluralism as different from plurality. Here is the place in which the human intercourse on this highest level belongs essentially to the human condition. And in this kind of "dialogical dialogue," as I call it, the rules of the game are created in the very moment of the encounter and not postulated *a priori*—for example, that you have to know English, or that you have to accept the principle of noncontradiction, or the *catuskoṭi* is absolutely irrelevant, and so on. It is in the very encounter in which we find the ways in which we may dialogue, encounter, or find differences.

Here lies the weakness of comparative philosophy. My submission is that comparative philosophy is not possible, because in order to compare two different things I have to be



outside the comparanda in order to be fair. From which point of view do we compare? We are already one of them—we cannot dispense with philosophy as a kind of human reflection of what we are and what we do and what we say in the meaning of our words. Comparative philosophy is—playing with words—an “imparative philosophy,” because in medieval Latin, *imparare* means learning from one another. Learning from one another, learning from and in the *Auseinandersetzung*, the discussion itself. Generally speaking we know only one language. I know the *śūnyatā* language, and I am totally at home with the *pūrṇatv* language or the other one. And in that language we are trying to express, to formulate the fundamental intuition or one of the most basic intuitions of that particular tradition. Here we come together, people who speak at least one language, and all together the three languages.

That is the challenge and the possibility, that we listen to one another, and in order to listen we have to make a little void in ourselves. And that's why this symposium is existential. Meditation or silence, or being together, or even eating a meal together—these are not accidental to that communication, if we are somewhat responsible and aware of our responsibility. If we really speak two different languages—then I answer my first question—“Are we saying the same or are we not saying the same?” Yes and no. A universal language will chop off every kind of *dhvani*, nuances, resonances. And it is a symphony that emerges. I cannot speak all the languages, but I can learn from the language of the other and enrich my intuition, not—as the Dalai Lama says and Samdhong Rinpoche has also told—as mixture, syncretism, and all saying that it is the same. But we have to attune our intellectual ears to the music—and each language is a music—of the other person's language. And then fecundate, deepen, and criticize the shortcomings of what we thought was almost ultimate and definitive. And then we discover that the so-called Ultimate is relatively ultimate, and in a relatively delimited field of experience and historical religion. If we really speak two languages, we discover immediately that a language is more than just meaning. In German there is a difference between *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (meaning). It is more than *Sinn*, it is more than *Bedeutung*—it is the music of the language.

Well, I think this is our task: to listen to the music, to sing the meaning, the intuitions and allusions and symbolism of the other language. If we succeed in deepening these intuitions that are symbolized in these three rich, polysemic, and difficult words, then our seminar will have fulfilled not only our expectations, but also perhaps contributed a little bit to what we are all seeking: peace in the world.

## THE DESTINY OF TECHNOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION

### *An Ancient Buddhist Legend Romavisaya*

#### The Present Context

Buddhist scholars, and in general those who have received an Asian humanist education, know the *Aśokāvadāna*, or the Aśoka legend regarding the noble and mighty deeds of the great king, the Mahācakravartin.<sup>1</sup> But, to my knowledge, there is only one episode in this legend, which occurs in just one text: in the Burmese *Lokapaññati*, recently studied, edited, and translated.<sup>2</sup> From this source the legend spread, at a later date, to some countries of Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup>

This legend reveals, in my opinion, some archetypes of the past regarding human nature as well as East-West relationships and a cryptic message regarding the future of the destiny of human civilizations. I shall offer an interpretation of this story, which the medievals might have called *allegoric anagogical*: I shall consider this text of the past in the context of the present. I shall not make this paper heavy with footnotes or with hermeneutical "praenotanda" to justify this interpretation. I have tried to do this elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> To justify my interpretation, it may suffice to say that it purports to be neither *the* interpretation nor an exegesis of the mind of the author, but rather a legitimate hermeneutic of the concerns of the reader prompted by the prophetic power of a text.

The context within which I wish to comment on our text is that of the technocratic complex—that is, pan-economic ideology fused into technological society. This technological civilization is penetrating more and more into all the corners of the world and invading human fields where formerly other cultures flourished.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. vgr. J. Przyluski, *La légende de l'empereur Aśoka (Aśokavadāna) dans les textes indiens et chinois* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1926–1928).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. Denis, "La lokapaññati et la légende birmane d'Aśoka," *Journal Asiatique* (1976): 97–116; and more especially the doctoral thesis (Université de Paris, June 16, 1976) of the same author; *La lokapaññati et les idées cosmologiques du bouddhisme ancien*, 2 vols. (Lille: Reproduction de Thèses; Paris: Librairie H. Champion, 1971), which is my main source for this chapter. See also the laudatory book review by A. Bareaux (*Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême Orient* 66 [1979]: 299–301), who, giving a summary of the entire work, does not mention the certainly parenthetical story on which I am going to comment.

<sup>3</sup> I should like to express my gratitude to Eugene Denis (n. 2), although, except for the text, the entire hermeneutical study is my own.

<sup>4</sup> In, for instance, "The Texture of a Text," *Point of Contact* 5 (April–May 1978): 5164; and in *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979; reprint, 1983, Asian Trading Corporation).

The Westernization of a great part of the world under the cloak of modernization is a well-known phenomenon. But whereas in the West there is an increasing movement toward a posttechnological and postindustrial society (which, however, is not radically opposed to modernity), the great majority of the countries where technology has yet to reach the sophistication and dominance seen in the West are unwilling to pay heed to such movements, mistrusting them as tools of the "developed" countries to keep the economically poor nations under domination. Discussions of pollution, the energy crisis, ecology, the arms race, and mini-economies are luxuries of the "First World," perhaps strategies of the "Second," but certainly not deserving of priority in the so wrongly and uncritically called "Third World." In fact, all those issues seem to the elites of "Third World" countries to be secondary, if not irrelevant, rather than serious problems crying for radically new solutions. For them it is business as usual, which means allowing the inertia momentum of technology in a pan-economic world system to continue more or less unhampered.

Against this background, let us turn to the ancient text.

### The Text of the Past

We are in the city of Pāṭaliputra (the modern Patna on the Ganges) in the times of King Ajātaśatru, the grandfather of Aśoka the Emperor. The Pāli text is certainly of a later date, the eleventh or twelfth century AD, but the sources are at least prior to the sixth century, when the lost Sanskrit *Lokaprajñāpti* was translated into Chinese by Paramārtha in 558, although the Chinese text, unlike the Pāli document, does not contain our legend. So, we cannot be absolutely sure if this legend is older than the tenth century. At any rate, the story refers to the earlier period of the golden age of Buddhism in India. Aśoka lived in the third century BC, that is, two and a half centuries after Buddha (218 years, according to the Singhalese tradition followed by a part of our text) and his grandfather a century earlier (the nun who knew about the relics was 120 years old, and she recalled the fact of venerating the relics when she was a girl of 7). A second part of the text seems to follow the other chronology of situating Aśoka only 100 years after Buddha's death, as we shall explain later.

The text begins by asking just our question: "How is it that in the Kingdom of Roma (*roma-visaya*) there are so many machine engineers (*bahulayanta-kārā*), experts in magical technologies?" How is it that the technocratic complex originates in the West?

The text goes on to say that these machines are "spirit-bearing engines" (*bhūta-vāhana-yanta*).<sup>5</sup> They have been constructed—says the text—"as instruments of protection," that is, as mechanisms of defense. They perform all sorts of actions, such as "commerce, cultivation of fields, conquests, executions, etc." And the machine engineers are not free to leave the country. They are supposedly not slaves; but if the absence of such an expert is noticed, he is sought out wherever he may be and one of those engines is sent to kill him. So the kingdom preserves its power—and the people go on working. The ideal is to put the nation back to work! Work is worship.

The story is simple. Says the text,

<sup>5</sup> *Yanta* (in Sanskrit, *yantra*): instrument of support, machine engine, diagram (cf. *yam*, *yamati*; to sustain, hold, support, restrain). *Vāhana*: conveyance, bearer, carrier (cf. *vāh* from *vah*, *vahati*: to convey, carry, transport, lead, vehicle (cf. Latin: *vehiculum*, German: *bewegen*). *Bhūta*: spirit, ghost, literally: become, been, gone (cf. *bhū*: becoming, being, existing, from *bhū*, *bhāvati*: to become, be, exist; cf. Greek: *phuo*. Latin: *fui*. German: *bin*).

A young man was born in the city of Pāṭaliputta.<sup>6</sup> He had heard from popular parlance about this fact [mentioned previously]: that there existed in the Kingdom of Roma an automatic megamachine (*mahāntam bhūtavāhanayantam*). By means of artifice, he died, saying, "I am going to construct as many of such machines as there are people in Pāṭaliputta."

The young man of Pāṭaliputta is reborn in Roma and eventually marries the daughter of the master of the robots. He learns from his father-in-law the secrets of automation. But all those who have such an "education" have to be duly registered and cannot leave the country. He is in a quandary. He plans a stratagem. When his son is of age, he tells him,

I am going back to the city of Pāṭaliputta. Once they discover my escape they will come to persecute me and will have me killed by one of those spirit-bearing engines which go into the sky. Then you are to go to my country, the country of the Law (*dhamma-deśa*). Find the leaf that I have inserted in my own flesh concerning those spirit-bearing engines and take it out. Having gone to the city of Pāṭaliputta you will inform my family. Then make your livelihood with the spirit-bearing engines.

And so it happened. The son, having heard of the death of his father, performed the funeral rites for him, took out the written secret from his thigh, and went to the city of his ancestors.

There the king Ajātaśatru was constructing an underground structure to keep and protect the relics of the Blessed One. All sorts of interesting details are given. To ensure the best defense of the place he lets the man who came from the Kingdom of Roma construct a set of engines in the shape of men with swords in their hands ready to kill anybody violating the enclosure. These mechanical men (*yanta-purisa*) would constantly move around the enclosure, animated by an internal spirit.

To make a long story short, the king has a son (Bindusāra), who in his time had also a son, the great Emperor Aśoka. Aśoka learns from divination that his role is to discover the precious relics and build the famous eighty-four thousand *stūpas*, but he does not know where the relics are. He sends his elephant with one thousand pieces of money in search of information. A nun, 120 years old, hears the proclamation of the Emperor and tells him about the place where her preceptress used to perform the offerings and make the ritual prostrations when she was a novice of 7. Following this information Aśoka uncovers the mighty structures, but now they find the formidable automatic defenses. Again the royal elephant, accompanied by drums and the tinkling of the thousand pieces of money strung about his head, proclaims Aśoka's edict and the prize for dismantling the weaponry.<sup>7</sup> The text continues,

That man who knew the spirit-bearing engines, and who was the son of the one who had gone to the Kingdom of Roma, having heard the imperial edict, said, "I am going to dismantle the system" (*yo so puriso, bhūtā vāhana-yantajānanako romavisayāgatassa putto tado taṃ sutvā evaṃ*) "āha: aham yantam vighātessāmi".

<sup>6</sup> Note that when I quote directly from the text, I use the Pāli spelling Pāṭaliputta. All references to the city in my own commentary utilize the traditional Sanskrit spelling of Pāṭaliputra, the ancient name for modern Patna (Bihar) on the Ganges.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, Aśoka gives the thousand pieces of money to the man, but the text does not mention the reward given to the old nun. And rightly so: a monk or nun, a renouncer, does not accept any reward.

And so he did, so that the great Emperor could perform his rites and later build the great *stūpa* at Patna and the eighty-four thousand *stūpas* in the eighty-four thousand villages of Jambudvīpa.<sup>8</sup> How that same man can be still alive after over hundred years may be explained by Denis's hypothesis of the other chronology of only one hundred years between the beginning of Aśoka's reign and the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*.<sup>9</sup>

The story interpolates here the legend of Upagutta (Upagupta), which is also known in other texts.<sup>10</sup>

After this interruption, our story continues. The king of Roma (*romako rājā*) heard of the scandalous fact that somebody outside his kingdom had such sophisticated arms: "The rājā said, 'By what kind of means has a man from Paṭaliputta come to know the spirit-bearing engines?'"

What on earth has happened here? He is told of what has happened and sends a sealed box allegedly containing precious jewels as a diplomatic gesture of admiration and homage to the noble emperor of such a merited power. The envoys leave, and Aśoka calls again for the only man who has the technical skills to decipher such devices. Our man surmises the stratagem and so tells the king. However, the cupidity of his ministers finally prevails, and Aśoka orders the man to open the box. The man begs leave to go first to his wife and children for offerings and recommendations. Then, as ordered, he opens the box. The robot immediately cuts off his head and flies back to the kingdom of Roma. King Aśoka laments the fact and reprimands his ministers. And at his due time he went to the *devaloka*, the heaven of the Gods.

This chapter, 14.6, ends with these words: "Thus ends the treatise on the ways of transmigration" (*evam samsāra-vibhāga-niṭṭhito*).

### The Interpretation of the Future

Keeping in mind the background mentioned at the beginning, being aware that any reading of text is also a reading *into* it, and also conscious that a text means whatever meaning can be extracted from it, provided we do not absolutize our interpretation, we can address to our text a series of questions. For clarity's sake and without any specific aim, I shall enumerate some points.

#### The Automation Idea

If human beings are self-moving and up to a certain extent self-motivated, if living beings also seem to have an inner principle of movement, what prevents us from imagining the possibility of robots—of material artifacts having also a soul, a spirit, an internal motor?

<sup>8</sup> Jambudvīpa is the island of Jambu where India is located. It is the central island of a set of concentric islands. In the center of that island is Mount Meru (thus, the center of the universe) on which there is planted a giant jambu tree.

<sup>9</sup> In this sense the expert would have been some 120 years old, although one could perhaps think that it is his son or grandson so that when he later says "father," it may mean "grandfather."

<sup>10</sup> It is a beautiful legend that contains the frequently recurring theme in religious literature that the apparently unworthy, the sinner or the lowest, is the proper person to perform the extraordinary act. Here it is only the youngest novice of seven years who is capable of doing the miracle of protecting the Nāga king against the attack of the king of the Garuḍas. The abbot, vice abbot, and all the other monks did not have the courage even to try. The novice does it in the spirit of obedience and "with an almost imperceptible smile," says the text.

But there is more in our text. That everything is alive and thus self-moving is an almost universal traditional idea. However, our text goes further. It speaks of human constructs which are the vehicles of human spirits; it speaks of a certain incarnation of the spirits or a kind of ensouled instrument. The text calls them *yanta-purisā*, mechanical men. We have more than just extrapolation of human needs or an anthropomorphic imagination as when birds speak or animals have human features, or when nonhuman ghosts or celestial beings appear among humans. In a certain way we have here more a cosmomorphic Man than an anthropomorphic utensil. They might have been seen as machines in the shape of human beings and moved or animated by an ancestor.<sup>11</sup> Those robots are autonomous; they follow their own rules. They may have been planned or constructed by human beings, but they are not subjected to them and are in a way superior. Nobody can overpower them. Their engineers can only steer them, and this only under certain conditions. Once let loose, not even their constructors can control them. Once you split the atom . . .

It is interesting to note that the few parallel legends reporting the care with which the relics were protected speak of purely mechanical devices—such as, for instance, a gigantic revolving wheel moved by the wind and studded with swords to ward off any approach to the sacred places. But nowhere except here, to my knowledge (and this is attested by Denis), do we find the idea of a cosmomorphic Man. It is not so much a machine attached to a man as it is a man who has become a machine.

A robot is as much a man converted into a machine as a machine converted into a man. The gap between the two certainly diminishes. Indeed, the great problem lies in what direction the equilibrium is displaced: to the machinization of man or to the humanization of the machine? For Man it may be a degradation, but for the machine it is an upgrading.<sup>12</sup> Yet, is the hybrid able to live?

That machines have a ghost is still a popular belief of many people, not excluding those in the industrialized world, as many sociological studies show (cranes are "punished," machines are banned, etc.). The question is inevitably who commands, the ghost or the Man? At any rate, what we find here is not the machine of first degree—that is, the *manus longa*, the extension of Man's hand, the instrument docile to the human will, the lever, the hammer, the wheel, and the like. What we find here is the second-degree machine, that is, the artifact that is somewhat independent of humans—that has its own rules and its own rhythms that have to be followed by men if they want to use these selfsame machines. We have here something more than the human dream, say, to have wings and fly like the birds. We do not have here powerful cannons and dreadful arms used by men as in many epics East and West, but we have *homunculi* themselves waging warfare. It is the automation idea. It is fascinating—and frightening—to find it foretold at this early period of history.

### *Automation Comes from the West*

What has prompted our text to situate in Rome the center of an automated civilization is more than a merely historical question. Whatever immediate causes may have led the author of this text to situate automatic machines in the West, there may still be room for deeper

<sup>11</sup> The phrase describing the king of Roma sending the box to Pātāliputra may suggest that the spirit animating the hidden robot is the soul of a dead person, which should be interpreted within the horizon of reincarnation.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. R. Panikkar, "Technique et temps: la technochronie," in E. Castelli (ed.), *Tecnica e Casistica* (Roma: Istituto di Studi Filosofici, 1964), 195–229, especially 211–17.

causes. The Buddhists had met the Greeks and might have been impressed by the machines of the troops of Alexander; China might have been equally impressive, and the great empires of Assyria, Babylonia, and many others with their technical skills and sophistication were certainly not unknown to the citizens of Pāṭaliputra. The ancients knew the *De automatis* of Heron of Alexandria and of the *pneumatica*, or artifacts moved by pressurized air, both described by Philo of Byzantium; they knew also the *De machinis bellicis* of Heron of Byzantium. But what is striking is the fact that the Buddhist imagination situates these much more sophisticated entities in the kingdom of Roma.

There seems to be a deeper instinct at play here, a kind of authentic insight into the future, as if foreseeing that the technical development of the modern West was more than just a historical accident. There already seems to be a recognition that the link between this type of technology and the Western culture is deeper than it is in other civilizations.

To be sure, later interpretations will ascribe to Viśvakarman similar skills, and Rome may be seen, as Byzantium and even Bengal, as the land of magical expertise.<sup>13</sup> But the fact still remains that what has instinctively struck the Eastern mind is the high degree of technology developed by the Western fraction of the human world. Rome is here without doubt the symbol of the Western spirit.

Without overstressing the psycho-historical interpretation, but keeping in mind the human obsession with the distinction between *svadeshi* (i.e., national, endogenous, self-made things) and *videshi* (i.e., foreign, exogenous, alien-made things), we may observe here that it is taken for a fact that these powerful but dangerous devices come from a foreign land and that this land is precisely the West (Europe). No need, again, to contradict the Gandhian categories of self-rule or economic theories of self-sufficiency; suffice that the point here is the belief, deeply anchored in the human mind, that the most exciting things come from the outside. The savior, in the history of religious parlance, comes most often from a foreign land—at least from across the river; the prophet always brings a message from beyond himself—from heaven, the stars, or at least from a more or less exotic country. However, the enemy, the danger, and the menace also come mostly from the outside. The “saving power” of the machine in the mentality of modern India, for example, comes certainly from beyond Mount Kailash.

### *The West Hankers for Power and the East after Dharma*

We should not forget the apologetic and eulogistic character of the text. It defends the East and praises Aśoka. It, nevertheless, depicts a believable situation because it reflects a common interpretation, wrong as this later might be found to be by some modern and more sophisticated interpreters of human culture. I assume the reader will follow my diachronical irony and not oblige me to constantly make use of quote marks or the unidiomatic subjunctive. The reader is invited to read diachronically, across the ages. All resemblances are here intentional.

Roma has great skills and great power, but keeps them zealously for itself. The inventions are secret, or as the contemporary euphemism puts it, “classified.” Exports are allowed under licenses, patents only when they bring profit. Defense is the modern euphemism for unfreedom, and security for fear. You cannot reveal the atomic secrets or the research done for the sake of “defense.” Everything has to be written down in a book, and the freedom is only apparent. You may have your paid holidays, but in order to work in such sensitive areas you will have to be previously “cleared” (even if the scrutiny is called passport, income tax,

<sup>13</sup> Cf. E. Denis (n. 2).

visa, university degree, interviews, military service, or national security). The West is caught in its own machinery, and most of the inhabitants are work addicts, slaves of labor and the machinery. The modernity of the description is only too striking. Power means order, order needs organization, and organization curtails your freedom. They cannot leave the kingdom, and when they do, they need not only papers and permissions but also to carry with them all the gadgets of modern technology, even if they are called medicines and pills, lest they should drink water and catch gastroenteritis. Tourism represents the expansion of the Western machinery throughout its colonies, even if these gadgets be called hotels, guided tours, or safaris in an exotic environment where the Westernized person can let loose otherwise repressed inhibitions.

But if the West is the villain, the East is here the good fellow. All the skills are used for protecting the holy relics and fostering of the *dharmā*. Moreover, the East seems to utilize all those foreign skills to promote its own welfare, naively believing that it can keep everything under control and for its own profit. It thinks it can "modernize"—that is, Westernize—and not pay the price: "We shall only profit from the benefits." The East is self-righteous, even if the greed of the ministers has caused the death of their best citizen, even if a small elite keeps the people down in order to make gigantic profits in trading with the West. In some cases it may be that the most cultivated in the East feel frustrated and emigrate. Over half the medical profession in England comes from India and Pakistan. The brain drain of liberal professions is well known in Asia and Africa. On the other hand, the most genuine and traditional, whose rights are trampled upon under the guise of development and education, feel cynical, despaired, resigned. Others, perhaps the best, rebel. But what can you expect of beggars, outcasts, slum dwellers, and uneducated people, or from those "ungrateful" Westerners educated who turn against their masters? The corporations, the elites, the zamindars, the police, or the governments will reestablish law and order—that is, the status quo. Internal colonialism is rampant. The king of Roma now has emissaries everywhere. The so-called Third World is the best client in buying armaments for its self-destruction. The dilemma is excruciating: If the East or the South does not fight back with the same arms, it is ignored, choked, asphyxiated; if it hits back, it is crushed. The First World cynically expects that they will solve the problem of overpopulation by destroying each other. Not without sarcastic compassion, it sells arms to all combatants. And in the East, "Perhaps my son will be reborn in the kingdom of Roma, court the daughter of the president, get the atomic secrets . . . and blow up the world."

The hypocritical consolation is mutual: "We do not have power, but the *dharmā* is on our side"; "On our shoulders rests the heavy responsibility of power for the benefit of all; after all, our technology feeds the world." We hear only the preaching of patience and hope in a very slow process of evolution, so as not to upset the privileged ones. No wonder that many do not wish to return or that others withdraw into their multisecular passivity. After all, that malefic computer that "we" could learn to manage came from the West.

What the West wants is power, and for this it needs the machine. What the East strives for is *dharmā*, and for this it needs the leisure that the machine promises, but without its compulsions and demands. Ah, if the peoples of the East could import to Pāṭaliputra those wonders that they have seen in Roma, they could dedicate themselves to the pursuit of *dharmā* . . . without effort, without labor! Technology has habituated us to a lack of effort, concentration, mindfulness. Think of a washing machine or just a small calculator. I play with my fingers and do not need to calculate—that is, to think. The East has fallen into the trap, "We shall have more free time to do further business!"



*The Machine Enhances Power but Diminishes Freedom*

Mechanical civilization makes possible the realization of the most far-fetched dreams: we can fly, calculate otherwise impossible operations, transport ourselves from one continent to another, grow bigger fruits, have quicker harvests, produce more things, and so on. It is all reduced to the discovery of higher speeds and the desire for limitless acceleration. Technology "saves" the world. But the price to be paid in the kingdom of Roma and, alas, even in Pāṭaliputra and elsewhere, is a very heavy one. Some will say that technology serves only to solve—and only partially—the problems it itself has created. In any case, the citizens of the civilization of the megamachine are not free to leave. We may assume that sometimes it may be because of competition and balance of power, national security and the like. But a deeper reason may be that they simply are needed; they have to be tied to the megamachine so that it may go on working. The megamachine is not an everlasting flame or a flickering lamp to a humble deity, like the four lamps kept burning those hundred years by the power of concentration of Mahākassapa, the elder monk whom they found when unearthing the relics of the Blessed One. The megamachine demands an uninterrupted twenty-four-hour shift so that all may run in order. No relaxing is possible; no distraction permissible. This civilization would collapse without its technicians of all sorts, who have become like indispensable ants for the maintenance of the services—even if they have to become workaholics, and even if the services reduce humans to being serfs of the megamachine. Becoming indispensable, we lose our independence. The machine cannot stop. There is no day and night. Not only could chickens and cows tell us of ever burning lamps and incessant music in order to produce more eggs and more milk; the children of Man could also tell us of their entrapment in what is called civilized life in which the moon and the stars do not matter and the sun is only a minor deity. But don't worry: the animals cannot speak and the humans cannot feel. They hardly even try to jump outside the cages they have built for themselves: the police, the army, or the medicos would bring them back to law and order, to their own country or the proper asylum. . . .

No wonder there is protest and escapism. To be sure, a "wild" minority tries to escape. All the others are already tamed—that is, civilized—and feel quite comfortable in the mechanical world. They all are very powerful and can boast of destroying entire cities and even blast the whole planet to ashes. But they are paralyzed by their own power. Deterrence is certainly effective, not so much with the enemy as with one's own people. So as not to disturb the fragile balance, we dare not be ourselves, or stretch a friendly hand to the enemy lest he should lose his fear. This would surely upset the balance. Meanwhile, we are *compelled* to increase our might in order to defend "our" freedom, even if at the cost of "their" freedom. Technology claimed, in its self-justification, that it would free Man from the terror and shackles of nature—after it had blasphemed and desecrated her, of course. Now we are not only inundated with technical gadgets but entangled in the technological universe. It entraps us in a purely technocratic world that is neither divine, nor human, nor cosmic. It creates an artificial empire from which there is no exit. Nobody can leave the kingdom of Roma.

*Every Value Has to Be Won*

It would be a mistake to read the text in a chauvinistic spirit. An intriguing symbolism lies in the fact that the values of the world (be it minerals or oil or relics) seem to be hidden deep down in the earth (by Father God, Mother Nature, or Brother Man) and that they are

all well guarded. Religion, science, and politics all have to dig down into the deeper layers of reality to discover their corresponding treasures. You may call it contemplation, research, national identity (power?), or any other name. This archetype is almost universal, as legends and stories from all corners of the world testify. Every value is well protected. The princess is sleeping in a well-guarded and hidden castle. But here there is something specific. It requires technical skills to unearth those values. Aśoka could not have been the paradigm of *dharma* if he had not been able to construct the *stupas*, whose construction required the discovery of the relics. He could not have been the reincarnation of that young boy Piyadassi who made the perfect offering of dust (*pamsu-pradāna*) to the Buddha, who, in return, predicted the *bala-cakkavatti* (Aśoka) and his meritorious acts of erecting the eighty-four thousand *stupas* in Jambudvīpa. But the relics could have not been recovered without technical know-how of the robots. Technology at the service of *dharma*! And this is its alleged justification. "We do not pollute the earth and the seas for the sake of it, but to give man food, riches, power; we do not practice asceticism, *tapas*, and virtues for the fun of it, but because they yield sanctity, *siddhis*, and great satisfaction." Our hero sacrifices his life for the sake of benefiting his fellow citizens.

Nothing is gratuitous; nothing is grace; nothing is free. You have to work in order to eat—one of the most devastating distortions of the real principles of human dignity and freedom. Everything has a price tag. Your time is mortgaged and broken into pieces, which you sell to the best bidder. And space equally so. You have to conquer—with money at least—the place you occupy—the place in society as well as the place in space. The home is no longer a house in the sense of the old Spanish word *vivienda*, which means both house and way of life, or lifestyle, but an apartment, a parking lot allotted to you, all isolating you, setting you "apart"—allowing you privacy, protecting you from the dangers technology itself has created.

For everything a thousand pieces of money (pieces of paper) are required.

Technology does not allow us to have free food, free water, free fields, free earth. The entire culture has been monetized. All have become marketable. The realm of grace goes against the second principle of thermodynamics. It has no place in the technocratic complex.

### *Every System Has Loopholes*

The machines are perfect, the computers are infallible; the system can have checks and self-regulatory devices to make it safe—human errors notwithstanding. But somebody has to push the button, someone has to make the decision. Somebody else may infiltrate, or what is more dangerous, a conservative may turn into a radical by a process of internal conversion, having discovered the inhumanity of the system. The cases of Oppenheimer or Archbishop Romero are not rare. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Or somebody else may get at the custodians and easily extract the secret from them. Somehow the secrets of Roma were leaked out in such a perfect way that the king could not find fault with anybody. You may wage war to kill the culprits or traitors. But there is no peace.

War has *never* led to peace. War may lead to victory, but victory is victory, not peace; it is a truce until the defeated (or their grandchildren) have reorganized themselves. Peace in our terms is a *contradictio in adjecto*, a hypocritical contradiction. It denies what it stands for: the real freedom of the human person. Peace without consensus is no peace. Here lies the political significance of what I have been calling dialogical dialogue. Even a dialectical victory will trigger revenge.

However this may be, a perfect system would be not only inhuman but also not perfect; it would choke its members until they died of suffocation. A perfect system would eliminate all freedom and destroy itself. The Gödel theorem also applies to technology. So the very ideal of a technologically perfect society is a contradiction in terms.

Our text has a masterly way of putting it. It is its very conclusion. The events of our story all belong to the ways of *saṃsāra*, the *saṃsāragati-vibhāga*, the cycles of the cosmic plays in which men and gods are inextricably intertwined. Aśoka went to heaven, to the dwelling place of the gods.

There is no sense of tragedy here. Our lives have to finish one way or another, and the entire history of humankind is also just a moment in the cosmic display of the entire reality. The solar system has already lived out half its time. If an atomic catastrophe or the bomb comes from some missiles or from Helios, *ultimately* it makes no difference. The projection of our real lives into another world is not very convincing either. It postpones the difficulty (there the same problems would arise), unless the other world is so a-human that we have nothing to do—to be—there (it does not solve our problem).

The entire text breathes the mahāyānic serenity of seeing the historical events unfolding themselves in the framework of space and time as symbols and revelations of that ultimate reality, which, because it has no consistency, no substance, can coexist with anything. *Samṣāra* is *nirvāṇa* and *nirvāṇa saṃsāra*. The play has to be played, even if it seems to be, or really is, a drama. But it is not a tragedy. This does not necessarily condemn us to inaction or indifference and much less to insensibility. It gives but a sense of equanimity, serenity, and mirth, which frees us to do what we think we should. And this is not to prolong the agony of a dying civilization, but to lay down the foundations for a human survival that is at the same time humane.

### *Not Even the Creators of the Machines Can Control Them*

Our story is very realistic. A century has elapsed, and yet the Western-returned man has not been able to attract disciples with the same creative power as his colleagues in the West. He is still alone in Pāṭaliputra. You can teach technical skills, but creativity can neither be taught nor inherited. Roma, that is, the West, will always remain the cradle of modern technology. The East may very well learn how to make the machines function and, perhaps after some time spent in manufacturing only spare parts, may eventually be able (and allowed) to assemble the whole machine at home. But meanwhile Roma will have progressed far beyond that point. Sophisticated and high technology is not so willingly exported. Those who have not invented the machines, the peoples of the East who do not have the connaturality with the archetypes of the basis of modern technology, will always remain second-rate technicians, secondary technologists, exceptions notwithstanding. The peoples of the East will not relish or enjoy working with materials and linear time like those peoples in the West, where the scientific-technological outlook is a product of their own culture, and whose inherited world is made up of concepts of matter, time, and space that are homogeneous with the scientific concepts. Modern economists express the consequences of this fact by saying that the rich nations become richer and the poor, poorer. It cannot be otherwise. For the former, this kind of work is creativity; for the latter, sheer fatigue. The so-called programs of development are a way of making those countries more dependent—and more self-alienated. To begin with, they have to learn English or French or Russian. They have to destroy, or at least repress, the archetypes of their own cultures. Cultural genocide is a subtle operation also practiced by the "natives"—the so-called educated or enlightened ones. The names they use may be

hallowed ones like *literacy, education, science, culture* . . . but all become instruments of power and alienation, because they are geared toward a monolithic technocratic complex.

But this is not all. The *yanta-purissā*, the mechanical men, have become today an army more powerful than their own creators. The old Indian wisdom used to say that he who rides a tiger cannot dismount it. The king of Roma might have second thoughts, but the device will now act on its own accord and not even respect one of its own creators. The righteous King Asoka does not blame his colleague in Roma or curse the machine, but simply regrets the ill advice of his own ministers. The mishap, however, has already occurred. The Man—his clan, tribe, nation, continent—has been wiped away. The machine has its own logic. For instance, a megamachine that requires for its own existence the piling up of atomic weapons will have to explode those artifacts sooner or later. It is subject to the law of sheer statistics.

When speaking of control, we should not only think technically and imagine a mere mechanical control of the machine. We should think humanly, more holistically, and integrate the total human picture. In other words, the temptation of power given by the technological civilization is too great to be resisted by the human will. It would require a superman.

The power the megamachine puts in human hands is a superhuman power that Man cannot handle. Our contemporaries of the technocratic complex are certainly not more prone to hatred than those living in other times and traditions. Feuds and hatreds are human, and the desire to kill, for instance, is not wholly alien to the human heart. But to kill with a dagger demands a good deal of passion and courage, quite different from the cold-blooded manner in which one presses a button in a comfortable room miles away from the resultant scene of unimaginable destruction and horror. Just a pill can spirit away a pilot's scruples. And the difference is not just in you but in the results. With the dagger you may eliminate your foe—whose relatives may make it very difficult for you—but with a modern device you can wipe out cities and nations with a "clean conscience."

The megamachine puts both parties under an irresistible temptation.

To make one's own livelihood, or rather to earn enough so as not to have to toil for the rest of your life—which is what the machine appears to promise in the nontechnological societies—is a temptation hard to resist. All the more so when one thinks that, if "we" do not do it, somebody else will. The box sent by the king of Roma is now everywhere. Some may warn that Pāṭaliputra will have to repay the loans with interest and blood; others will point out that for every dollar "given" to you, they will extract from three to five dollars and will make you more and more dependent—a drug addict, but there will be enough lobbyists and parliamentarians around to practically oblige the nation to open the box.

The temptation is also overwhelmingly powerful for the other side. Once you have reached a certain standard of living, you do not easily renounce it, even if you begin to realize that it cannot be indefinitely sustained, if only because you are consuming much more than the average. Once you unleash the forces of nature—say, the atom—why seal up the box again? You will not wage a traditional war against Pāṭaliputra because of leakage in your organization, but will simply send a trade delegation or sell arms or technology. After all, who wants to go back to pretechnological or precolonial times? Call it dialectical materialism, historical destiny, progress, scientific advance, or the will of God; it all amounts to an assertion of the irresistible power of the technocratic complex.

### *The Machine Kills Its Own Children*

Our story has two heroes. Both are anonymous and both die. The father, for the welfare of his son and his country. The son, due to the greed of his fellow citizens

and the weakness of the system, in this case, the king. They have no name because their name is legion: lakhs of science students wandering to the West in search of technological knowledge, in the noble and naïve belief that it would help save their "undeveloped" countries.

In fact, the story has three heroes: the grandfather, the father, and the son. The first is still traditional and lives in the countryside, somewhere in one of the innumerable villages. He still believes in reincarnation, and he works day and night to pay for his son's going abroad, fancying himself reincarnated as a successful engineer, medical doctor, business executive, or technical specialist somewhere. But the second generation, perhaps even born in Roma—the West—longs, on second thought, to return to another type of life, that of Pāṭaliputra. His subdued archetypes awaken. He might even have married the daughter of science, called technology, and espoused Western culture. Yet his return is his death. Now he cannot live without technology. It is inserted deep down in his own flesh; he has inserted the secrets in his thigh. Perhaps his own son will have better luck. And, in fact, back in his country, he is quite successful and makes a lot of money. He belongs to the elite of the educated and Western-returned. Yet the political powers seek to manipulate him in ways he does not like, and he has to serve the king. Moreover, that very law of competition will, sooner or later, cause his own death. The very machines he is building have a hidden power. Many think it is only a box of jewels, a source of richness, and the secret of happiness. Politicians press him, and so do the common folk who have already tasted of the "good life," and have come to believe that a phone is better than telepathy, television than private imagination, tape recorder than improvising songs each time they come together, bottled liquors and canned food than living vintages and still-warm products from the earth mixed with their own perspiration. They all oblige him to open the box, to grow more and more, to produce further, to work harder. Only the ministers are blamed, and the system represented by the king does not seem to feel any responsibility. The system washes its hands of the event and only reprimands the lack of leadership of its business executives. Technology shall improve, they tell us; we shall avoid these mistakes in the future.

The text ends saying that all this belongs to the ways of *saṃsāra*. Aśoka went to heaven, but this is only an interlude. . . .

### A Summing Up

After the above analytic exegesis that follows my particular approach, I shall give the gist of the prophetic story.

It is certainly an interpolation, and as such we are entitled to take it as an independent legend.

It says that robots are real and very powerful. It affirms that they were invented somewhere else, but that they can be cultivated everywhere once we know the secret. It recognizes that they make powerful those who can master them, but it ends by saying that they will, eventually, cause the death of those who deal with them.

There are atom bombs, hydrogen bombs, and neutron bombs in the kingdom of Roma; there is a conception of civilization as a megamachine moved by its own ghost. Buddhist wisdom recognizes its power and acknowledges its risks, but also affirms its *saṃsāric* character, because the real values of human life seem to be hidden by the very light of the midday sun. Or, to repeat it in Christian parlance, Man is the king of creation. He should not abdicate in favor of robots. He should not allow himself to lose mastery over the world. He should not succumb to Lucifer, the light-bearer who is not light itself.

In sum, the destiny of the technological civilization is death. I invite you to, gently, dismantle it.

*Evaṃ me sutaṃ*, Thus I heard.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Students of Buddhism will know the delicious ambiguity of this formula: "I have heard it from a higher Source, from the lips of the Blessed One." That is, I do not speak just out of my head; I am not propounding an individualistic viewpoint, but expounding a venerable and traditional teaching. But this is how I have heard it, this is what I have understood. I speak under correction. I do not speak dogmatically. I pass on my understanding as I have grasped it. I vouch for what I have certainly heard: for it is an experience, but a fallible and imperfect one. It is for you to hear the same or another music, but we all have to listen carefully, i.e. to be obedient (*ob-audire*) to *Vāyu, Pneuma*: the Spirit—within and without.

## THE SMILE OF THE BUDDHA\*

### *Silence and the Word*

*When you are gathered together, monks,  
there are two things to be done:  
either talk about dhamma or the  
ariyan silence.*

MNI.161<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction: The Spirit, the Word, and the Name of God

There have been many attempts to express the awareness of the Absolute. Two of the main attitudes could be summed up in the expression *transcendent transcendence*, symbolizing the Semitic trend proper to the Jewish-Christian-Islamic and modern post-Christian tradition, and *immanent transcendence* proper to the bundle of religions we call Hinduism.

The Buddhist approach is startling. It does not fit into this typology. It would rather say that the true awareness of the Absolute is to have none.

Let us quote a passage that dates probably from pre-Buddhist times:

—Now once there was a dispute between the Spirit (*manas*) and the Word (*vāc*).  
"I am excellent," said the Spirit, and the Word said, "I am excellent."

—The Spirit said, "I am certainly better than you, because you do not utter anything which is not previously understood by me. So, as you just imitate what I am doing and simply follow me, I am certainly better than you."

—The Word said, "I am certainly better than you, because whatever you know. I make it known, I communicate it."

—They went to Prajāpati, asking for his decision. Prajāpati spoke in favor of the Spirit, saying (to the Word), "The Spirit is certainly better, because you only imitate and follow what the Spirit is doing; and he who is imitating and following what another does is undoubtedly inferior."

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\* *The Smile of the Buddha: The Silence and the Word*. In *Myth, Faith, and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979; reprint Bangalore: ATC, 1983, chap. 8).

<sup>1</sup> I. B. Horner's translation of the famous *Ariyapariyesanasutta* or *Discourse on the Aryan Quest*. Cf. the common Buddhist expression of noble silence: *ariyo tuṇhībhaṇo*: love of quiet: *appasadda-kāmo* (vg. *Dīgha-nikāya*, I, 208; etc.). Cf. Candrakīrti's beautiful saying: *Paramārtho hy āryāṇaḥ tūṣṇīḥ bhāvaḥ* "the most noble truth is silence" (*Prasannapadā*).

—As the Word was thus refuted, she became ashamed and miscarried. The Word spoke to Prajāpati, "I shall never become the carrier of your oblation, I whom you have thus refuted!"

Therefore, whatever in the sacrifice is performed for Prajāpati is done in a low voice, because the Word refused to carry the oblation to Prajāpati.<sup>2</sup>

This was a fundamental option. By and large, I would daresay India decided in favor of the Spirit while the West opted for the Word. The consequences are far-reaching. The Word is powerful; is articulate; leads to clarity and distinction, to science and technology; and is sure of itself once it has assumed a critical stance. The word organizes, commands, expresses, and even cries. The Spirit is helpless outside its inner realm; it is unstructured and insecure, for it blows now one way, now another, in a total freedom that often amounts to disorientation and anarchy. The Spirit feels, is concerned, contemplates, and is easily satisfied at the price of being blind to externals; it is joyful and happy. Perhaps the time has come when the twins have to meet if our world is to survive, but I am not now writing a fun commentary on this passage of Scripture. I would like to exemplify a single consequence, and would beg that what follows be understood in the light of the just-quoted text.

Most traditional religions are concerned with God to such an extent that to speak of an atheistic religion seems a contradiction in terms. Yet around the sixth century before Christ, at a time when humanity seemed to be awakening to reflexive self-consciousness, when Men began to develop a critical attitude, there appeared religious reforms—Jainism and Buddhism—that claimed to establish an entire way of life with no reference to God. These reforms, although excluding the existence, essence, name, and reality of God, soon became authentic religions. It could even be said that, for the Buddha, eliminating the name of God is the supreme religious undertaking.

Much has been written about so-called Buddhist atheism, and many hypotheses seeking to explain the silence of the Buddha have been proposed.<sup>3</sup> I would simply indicate here what seems to me the fundamental attitude of the Buddha on the problem of the name of God, an attitude at the origin of the whole Buddhist tradition, one that could well have exceptional importance for our time.

To be brief, I shall introduce the problem without referring to the *brahmanism*, the religious ferment and the multiplicity of gods at the time of the Buddha. I would only cite one verse of the Bible that will situate us in medias res: "You shall not utter the name of Yahweh your God in vain."<sup>4</sup>

Why?

Because one cannot speak of God but may only invoke him; because talk about God does not belong to current language; because his name is justified only in the vocative; because he is not an object like others, his name cannot be linked to other names; and because respect and adoration are due him. This is the traditional answer of nearly every religion.

<sup>2</sup> SB I.4, 5, 8–12.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the second section of this volume, where the reader will find the appropriate scholarly notes and historico-religious apparatus.

<sup>4</sup> Ex 20:7. The translation of the Jerusalem Bible is very significant: "You shall not utter the name of Yahweh your God to *misuse* it, for Yahweh will not leave unpunished they who utter his name to *misuse* it." The Vulgate gives, "Non assumes nomen Domini Dei tui in *vanum*: nec enim habebit insontem Dominus eum, qui assumpserit nomen Domini Dei sui frustra" (emphasis added). The Septuagint uses the same expression in both cases. Cf. as points of reference: Lev 19:12; 24:16; Deut 5:11; Sir 23:9; Mt 5:33–35; Jas 5:12.



Now the Buddha goes further. He tells us that any speaking of the name of God, any talk and even any thought about God, is just so much blasphemy. According to the spirit of the Buddha, it would be pure hypocrisy to forbid making images of God or speaking his name if we are at the same time permitted to think of "him." The purification must reach to the very heart of the matter. What use is it to cast God from the imagination, from the pen, the lips, or the walls, if one retains the thought of "him"? The Buddha tells us that God can only be named in vain, that every name of God is a vain name (a false name, if we follow the modern translation), that no name attains to God, who is beyond all possible naming.

Now all that is can be named—in one way or another—and being is the final object (or the ultimate subject, if one prefers) of all that is named. God cannot be named, nor can "he" even be called "being"; this would kill him, destroy him as God by situating him among the things of this world. God does not *have* a name because "he" *is* not. Buddhism will defend this in all its consequences.

"Why do you ask my name?"<sup>5</sup> says the Man, the angel, or the God who wrestles with Jacob. We should perhaps emphasize the importance of this text and others like it throughout the Christian tradition.<sup>6</sup>

We cannot ask the name of God either because we do not have the right to do so, for God has a hidden name, a secret name that he reveals only to the initiate, and so on (this seems to have been the line followed by the Christian and Islamic traditions), or else because he has no name. The Buddha chose the second alternative. We shall now attempt to examine it.

### The Double Silence of the Buddha

The Buddha's attitude is known. He does not answer questions on the ultimate nature of things. He refuses to be dragged into purely speculative discussions, for they do not lead to deliverance from suffering and so distract us from the existential and concrete meaning of life. The famous parable is well known: when a Man is pierced by an arrow, to concern himself with conjectures on the direction whence it came, its nature, the possible motives for which it was shot, the identity of the guilty Man, whether he was right, and so on, will cause the wounded Man's death long before there is time to answer the questions that were raised.

To understand the Buddha's attitude we may distinguish a double level in his silence.

#### *First-Degree Silence: The Silence of the Answer*

There is no possible answer to the question on the nature of the absolute since the question itself cannot be absolute—for we are relative, limited, contingent—and so it cannot give the desired information. If it is said that *nirvāṇa* does not exist, one falls into the existential contradiction of trying to show and follow a path to something that does not exist. If one says *nirvāṇa* exists, one falls into a whole series of insurmountable difficulties. Basically this would deal a fatal blow to transcendence; it would render transcendence accessible to our thought or to our speech. At the same time one falls into a speculative contradiction, for the existence of an absolute should explain the burning questions Man raises, resolve his

<sup>5</sup> Gen 32:30: "Cur quaeris nomen meum?" Cf. M. Eckhart's commentary in *I Expos. Genes., Opera Omnia: Lat. Werke* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938), 1:95–96, nos. 298–300.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Judg 13:18: "Cur quaeris nomen meum, quod est mirabile," and the relation that Christian thought has found between these two texts and those of Ps. 8:1 and 9, and Isa 9:6, etc. The Jerusalem Bible translates "mirabile" (*Jaumaston*) as "mysterious," the OAB "wonderful."

difficulties, and save him from contradiction.<sup>7</sup> Yet life and philosophy, experience as well as thought, bear witness that this is not the case. So we must remain silent if we do not want to fall into a contradiction. Silence is the sole response.

Nevertheless, it is not out of fear of committing himself or of falling into logical contradiction that the Buddha remains silent. Quite the contrary, his silence is irksome to people and, given the spirit of his time, it can well be said that his failure to elaborate a new theory amounted to casting himself from the company of cultivated and spiritual Men. His silence is an even greater commitment and more eloquent than any theory.

The Buddha wishes to teach us to know silence, to love it and to grasp its message. He speaks of noble silence and says the monk is a lover of silence. He thereby indicates that the reality of speech, the world of signs and expressions, can be surpassed. Concerning God, total silence must be kept. Neither affirming nor negating him can lead us to attain the threshold where divinity is found (or where it is also not found). His message invites us to go beyond the world of signs, words, speech, the realm of the *logos*. You will come to divinize the *logos*, he would have said, if you persist in trying to penetrate everything with the *logos* and go everywhere by the power of your discourse. This is what has happened in the West, where, in reaction, Man has gone to the other extreme: antitheism. Without myth, the *logos* becomes absolute, it divinizes itself. And a divinized *logos* destroys itself.

As for the excuse that the *logos* speaks only of the existence and not the essence of God, the "back" of God and not his "face," an indication and not a localization, an analogy and not a univocal concept, an image and not a notion, a name and not a reality; or that we can grasp the name of God as an ersatz, since we cannot understand his being, and so on—this the Buddha would refute as the worst example of spiritual and intellectual hypocrisy, as a religious farce that speaks of something affirmed to be unknown. The game must be played cleanly, the Buddha would say, and he was to attract crowds who were tired of complicated religiosities.

To say that for God everything is clear, to affirm that the contradictions, the ruptures of human life, its injustices, its sufferings, and its scandals are only appearances that have been deformed by our ignorance or by our sin (since all goes well, all is just and good for God in his happiness), to try to convince ourselves we must blindly accept that, in God, all the contradictions are resolved, that we must content ourselves with knowing only his existence—all this is for the Buddha a striking example of the weakness of the established religions that perpetuate a state of things (organization, cult, castes, etc.) for very mixed motives. Buddhism would add that defending the possibility of knowing the existence of God while closing off the content of his essence amounts to postulating his existence from motives that have nothing to do with God, but that stem from the human desire to find a crutch outside reality. Buddhism says it can do very well without the God hypothesis and does so without falling into the contradiction that affirms the most important thing about God—his existence—and yet denies knowledge of his essence. What is the meaning of an existence whose essence cannot be known—and whose essence, in a way, cannot be different from his existence?

But the Buddha does not stop here. He does not pretend that his silence is the adequate answer. He does not fall into the trap—as has so often happened in the history of human thought—of believing that everybody up to his time has been wrong and that he brings the

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<sup>7</sup> I can't resist the temptation to quote the "Buddhist" answer of Jesus in refusing to say by what authority he acted, when even the "chief priests and the elders of the people" did not know if the baptism of John was by heaven or by Man. Cf. Mt 21:23–27.

true solution. In a word, silence is not the Buddha's answer. He does not answer with silence. To think this would be to misunderstand him and to follow him only out of intellectual curiosity as if he were a simple philosopher.

To ask the name of God means to ask his identity, to enclose him in our categories, even if one says his name is secret and unknowable. According to the Buddha, God has no name because there is nothing that has his name. There is not even any meaning in saying that God is identical to himself. Because he has no identity, he cannot be identified by a name. The principle of identity would destroy him. There can be no God identical to God—to himself. But the Buddha is not an agnostic: he is an Enlightened One. It is here that the modern age and contemporary scholarly studies generally fail to grasp his spirit—reducing him to a thinker, a philosopher, or a great humanist—and forgetting that he was above all a prophet, a mystic, a saint. I would propose to call his silence a silence of the second degree.

### *Second-Degree Silence: The Silence of the Question*

The Buddha's silence is neither a methodology nor an answer; it is not a new theological or philosophical system. The Buddha does not answer by silence: He does not answer. He remains silent and gives no hermeneutic of his silence but only of his refusal to answer. He explains why he does not rally to the views of this party or that, he gives reasons why he does not share the belief of those who say the soul exists after death, and also why he is not of the contrary opinion. He gives reasons for his refusal, but he does not expand upon his silence. He says categorically that he is not of the opinion of those who say *A*, nor of those who say non-*A*, nor of those who at once affirm both *A* and non-*A* or deny both *A* and non-*A*.<sup>8</sup> He does not give a positive opinion. He goes over every possible opinion, but he does not give any opinion of his own. He is silent, but his silence is not an answer to the question.

What the Buddha does is to silence the question, to pacify the questioner by showing him that his question has no meaning, or rather that he does not have the power—hence, the right—to put such a question. In a way he puts the question, and thereby the questioner, in crisis. He puts the question in question, and thereby also the questioner who had unduly identified himself with his question. The question becomes anguishing only when Man identifies himself with his reason and loses the global perspective of his human situation. The entire message of Gautama is to make Men understand that torturing oneself over the so-called major questions of life is the great human fallacy, the source of misery, and the price paid for the utopia of believing one has the right, or worse yet the duty, to pierce the mystery of existence. An ideal like this is the fruit of human pride. What the Buddha requires is a realistic sense of acceptance of reality just as it presents itself, a total confidence in life, in what is given to us, without seeking to replace Reality with our own ideas. His faith is a cosmological faith, his hope is the elimination of any future, and his love is a compassion for Men of flesh and bone, our contemporaries, not an ideal entelechy that exists nowhere.

When Man discovers by himself that he has nothing to ask, that a question about ultimate Reality has no meaning, and yet in spite of this finds himself neither a rebel nor discouraged nor despairing, then will he begin to understand the liberating message of

<sup>8</sup> The fourteen propositions that the tradition attributes to the Buddha and that he refuses to uphold are the following:

1–4: the world is/is not/is and is not/neither is nor is not/finite in time;

5–8: the world is/is not/is and is not/neither is nor is not/finite in space;

9–12: Tathāgata exists/does not exist/exists and does not exist/neither exists nor does not exist/after death;

13–14: the soul is/is not identical with the body.

primitive Buddhism: the total acceptance of our human condition, of the real contingency in which we find ourselves. It is not a matter of resigning oneself to never surpassing the human condition; it is rather understanding that what we must do is better it. If it must be surpassed, this does not depend absolutely on us, and if it must not be surpassed, every effort to do so will lead us to alienation and only increase our misery. The whole message of the Buddha tends to render us silent, to silence our desires. It is often said (but easily forgotten) that the most intense desire or, as the Buddha himself says, thirst is to transgress Reality, to evade the human situation: to attach oneself to life is just as unreal and deadly as to long for death, no matter what the motive. The thirst for nonexistence is to be eliminated as well as the desire for existence.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit," not the poor who seek and beg, but the poor in spirit, those who do not want to jump beyond themselves spiritually nor believe they can become as Gods. The Buddha does not discourage human and secular initiatives, but he does not recognize evading the human condition by whatever means as a true religious undertaking.

We might sum up the Buddha's message thus: If there is a transcendence, it will take care of itself. And if it does not exist, it is useless to deceive oneself. But there is more to it. If it "exists," transcendence is so transcendent that it surpasses both our thought and our being, and thus also any attempt to name it. For the Buddha, to name the Absolute would be the great blasphemy. The Buddhist apophysis is at once ontic and ontological—silence taken seriously, not as another form of expression or speech. In the last part of this chapter I try to explain this with a dialectic borrowed from the Buddhist tradition.

### The Dialectical Game

"Is the principle of sufficient reason insufficient to name God?" Castelli asks us in his introduction to the colloquium on *The Name of God*.<sup>9</sup> Here then is the Buddha's genial answer, according to the Buddhist tradition.<sup>10</sup>

Without hesitation Buddhism tells us that by virtue of this very principle, we must renounce naming God, and also asking anything whatsoever about him. He cannot even be named without sinning against this basic principle of all rationality. How can we postulate a sufficient reason that is other than and superior or exterior (God) to that very principle of sufficient reason, without presupposing an infinite series of such principles? Before trying to grasp the Buddhist dialectic, I would like to make a brief excursus to situate the problem in the history of religions.

### *The Dialectic of the Name of God*

I shall summarize my point.<sup>11</sup> We can discover a sort of dialectical play regarding human relations with this superior principle we agree to call God.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *L'Analyse du langage théologique. Le nom de Dieu*, ed. E. Castelli (Paris: Aubier, 1969), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Even if these texts were not spoken by Gautama himself, they are ancient texts of the purest Buddhist tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the contributions of B. Bäumer, "Le nom secret dans l'hindouisme," and Marina Vesci, "Ka, le nom de Dieu comme pronom interrogatif darts les Veda, La démythisation du nom de Dieu," in the above-mentioned volume edited by E. Castelli (pp. 135–44, 145–54, respectively), which furnish the details of what is here condensed in a dialectic of nine points. Cf. also my chapter "Betrachtungen über die monotheistischen und polytheistischen Religionen" in *Die vielen Götter und der eine Herr* (Weilheim Obb., O. W. Barth, 1963), 43–51.

I would like to highlight the following moments. I would request that they not be considered chronological milestones but, if I may use the more accurate expression, *kairological* moments.

a. Before the cultural and religious complexity of the so-called great religions, each God is a local God with a local name, his proper name. To know the God is to know his name, and vice versa. The act of faith is the act of invoking the name. This name has usually been revealed in myth.

b. There is an early realization, either through encountering different traditions or by deepening the mystery of God, that God has several names. The first reaction is to postulate a plurality of Gods corresponding to the plurality of names. Thus the harmony between the name and the thing is not ruptured. To each name corresponds (one) God. But we should not confuse real(istic) polyonymy with so-called polytheism.

c. True polyonymy, however, cannot be maintained for very long. A plurality of Gods guaranteed by a plurality of names leads to the discovery that there is a basic unity among the Gods—that they are, in one way or another, only different manifestations of a single and unique supreme power. The innocence of the name begins to waver. Each name of God does not exhaust the divinity, since there are other names that also refer to the divinity. Men begin to suspect that the name of God is not God, or rather that his name is not *the* name of God, but *a* name of *one* God. The name of God does not express God, so to speak. A break, a hiatus, appears between the name and the thing. Truth bridges the gap.

d. At the same moment the divine name suffers its first crisis; that is, when the plurality of names suggests a plurality of Gods, the tradition of the hidden name of God appears. The names of God are not his true name. His true name is hidden, secret, and reveals itself only to him to whom God wants to reveal it. The divinity uncovers his true name to his devotees: The revelation is the revelation of this name.

e. The essence of the secret name is that it is unknown. In the beginning Man could be content to say that it is unknown to the uninitiated, but soon he becomes aware that the secret name represents something more than the divine whim to remain hidden or the selection (by the divinity) of a small group to whom the name would be revealed. Man is aware that God has a name that is in itself intrinsically hidden, as it were. One thus arrives at the highly suggestive formulation that the name of God is simply an interrogation. God is the question that is always open. His name is the simple question about him. To find him means to seek him; to know him means not to know him (to name him means to invoke an unknown God with an unknown name), for his name is the simple question, pure and simple. God is not a substance and has no name, but he is a question, a simple pronoun, an interrogative: Who?

f. The next moment of the kairological dialectic is of more than historico-religious interest. A good deal of mankind's contemporary reflection revolves around this point. If God is the transcendent, the nonanthropomorphic, the ever other, the interrogative pronoun, the question, the search, the road ever open and beyond, a suspicion enters the mind of Man: At bottom is he not really questioning himself rather than interrogating God? Is the question about God in its depth not the question about Man? Is anthropology not the true theology? Is the question about God not the anguished quest or the hope-filled question of Man concerning himself, the meaning of his life and destiny? Is it not really the Self that is sought?

g. The dialectical process does not end here. At this point Buddhism brings us its contribution. Since there is no appeasing answer to the question about God or Man, no explanation of the meaning of life or the mystery of existence, will silence not then be the true response? Does he alone who knows how to be silent understand the mystery of the real? We have already reached this point in our presentation and even the following point.

h. As an answer, silence remains nonetheless suspect, since every question requires a decision and a choice. Silence can appear cowardly, a lack of courage to take a position and rid oneself of travisms. If silence is a sign, it is a very weak and vague one. It is acceptable as a transition inasmuch as we dare not destroy all the idols at once, but it does not satisfy the human mind. It is here that our last point appears: silence as a question and not an answer. Man comes to silence the question: It lacks meaning. He no longer asks; he lives and has regained innocence on a higher plane.

i. This would be the last moment of this sort of dialectical circle. One returns to daily living, as the tenth Zen painting, the seventh mansion of St. Teresa d'Ávila, or any affirmation of nearly every mysticism shows. God is immanent and transcendent, existent and non-existent; and at the same time he is not. There is nothing more to be said. God is that about which there can be no talk. Discourse on God is basically inauthentic: only in the interior cell where the *logos* is silent can the Father be adored in spirit and truth.

This is not irrationalism, fideism, or religious romanticism: The Buddha leads us by the hand. I would like very briefly to develop his dialectic further.

### *Reduction to the Sublime*

In many instances the Buddha does not impose silence but wins over his adversaries, converting them to his way not by reducing their reasoning to absurdity but by what I would like to call a reduction to the sublime. It is for this reason that those won are not only won over but converted, and very often enter the order of the mendicant brothers (*bhikkhu*; in Sanskrit *bhikṣu*). Nevertheless, on rare occasions he reveals the dialectic of his thought by directing the attention of his interrogator to the meaning of the question itself.

"When a bhikṣu, Sirs, knows thus and sees thus, would that make him ready to take up this question as intelligent (and intelligible)?" he often asks after a long discourse on the absurdity of holding any opinion whatever on the ultimate problems of the human condition.<sup>12</sup>

I would like to analyze just one text. To the question repeated a thousand times in the dialogues of the Buddha concerning the meaning of life, the Buddha answers the monk Rādhā in this way: "Rādhā, you can grasp no limit to this question."<sup>13</sup> "That question is beyond the compass of an answer."<sup>14</sup>

But it is worth translating the text in full.

"Thus have I heard: The Exalted One was once staying near Sāvathī, in the Deer Park.

"Then the venerable Rādhā came to the Exalted One.

Having done so, he saluted the Exalted One and sat down to one side.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. for example, *Mahāli-sutta* 16, 19, i.e., DN VI (16 and 19).

<sup>13</sup> SN III.189. E. L. Woodward (trans.), *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, ed. Mrs. Rhys Davids (London: The Pāli Text Society, 1954), var. n, p. 156.

<sup>14</sup> SN V.218: *Mahā-vagga* IV.5. *Jaravagga* 42.2-*Unnabbo* Brahmano. Cf. the translation of F. L. Woodward, op. cit., var. V., p. 193:

"*Nibbāna*, brahmin, is the resort of release."

"But, Master Gautama, what is the resort of *Nibbāna*?"

"The question goes too far, brahmin. That question is beyond the compass of an answer. The aim of living the holy life, brahmin, is to plunge into *Nibbāna*. It has *Nibbāna* for its goal, *Nibbāna* for its ending."

Here the Pāli text reads *ajjha-parāṃ*, *brāhmaṇa*, *pañham*, *na-sakki parayantam gahetum*. Other texts read *accasārāṃ* (i.e., transcendental), instead of *ajjhaparāṃ*. The Nalanda edition in Devanāgarī reads *accayāsi*. Cf. the analysis of the text in the following notes.

"So seated, the venerable Rādha thus addressed the Exalted One:

"They say "Māra! Māra! Lord, pray, lord, how far is there Māra?"<sup>15</sup>

"Where a body is, Rādha, there would be Māra or things like Māra, or at any rate what is perishing. Therefore, Rādha, regard the body as Māra; regard it as of the nature of Māra; regard it as perishing, as an imposthume, as a dart, as pain: as a source of pain. They who regard it thus rightly regard it.

"And the same is to be said of feeling, perception, the activities and consciousness."

"But rightly regarding, Lord, for what purpose?"

"Rightly regarding, Rādha, for the sake of disgust."

"But disgust, Lord: for what purpose is it!"

"Disgust, Rādha, is to bring about dispassion."

"But dispassion, Lord: for what purpose is it?"

"Dispassion, Rādha, is to get release."

"But release, Lord: what is it for?"

"Release, Rādha, means *Nibbāna*."

"But, *Nibbāna*, Lord, what is the aim of that?"

"This question, Rādha, goes too far. You can grasp no limit to this question.<sup>16</sup>

Rooted in *Nibbāna*, Rādha, the holy life is lived.<sup>17</sup> *Nibbāna* is its goal, *Nibbāna* is its end."<sup>18</sup>

This is reduction to the sublime. He does not say the question has no meaning. How could he say this when it is the most anguishing question for a good part of mankind and the very torture from which, according to the Buddha himself, he has come to liberate us, the torment of useless anguish and suffering without reason? It is not an absurd question.

It is not a false question either. There are no false questions, properly speaking. It could be contradictory and in that sense false: a question that negates itself in the asking because it is founded on a contradiction. But here this is not the case.

Those who ask this question are not considered weak-minded by the Buddha, nor do they sin against logic. The most profound parallel I can find is between the Buddha's attitude and the cry of Jesus: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!" When confronting the Absolute, Man truly does not know what he is saying or doing.

Let us imagine the question, "What is God?" for this is basically the question at issue, although *Nirvāṇa* is the problem in the dialogue quoted above. The Buddha answers that the question itself cannot grasp its proper limits, that the question does not know what it is asking. We must be careful in our exegesis. The Buddha does not say that the Man who raises the question does not have something very definite in mind when he asks. He believes he knows it. He is asking about the Absolute, about God, about the last things, eternity, *nirvāṇa*, and so on. And he who asks will never be mistaken in his asking. He knows very well what he wishes to know. What is truth? Pilate asked this question of him whom he called "Man," and he, too, obtained only silence.

<sup>15</sup> Māra is a mythical personage in the life of the Buddha, the evil one, the tempter, and also death.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the Pāli: *accayāsi, Rādha. panham, nāsakkehi panhassa pariyaṇtam gahetum*. Nalanda edition. The Pāli Text Society gives *assa* instead of *accayāsi*.

<sup>17</sup> *Nibbāna gadham hi, Rādha. brahmacariyam vussati*. Interesting to note that what translations render as the "holy life" ("pure life," in the text) is *brahmacariyā*.

<sup>18</sup> SN III.187/189 (*Khandha-vagga* II.1). I have relied on the translation of F. L. Woodward in the volumes of the Pāli Text Society, op. cit., III, pp. 155-56.

What the Buddha is saying is that the question itself is not capable of defining its limits, that the question asks nothing, for it does not know where the request leads or what it asks for. Suppose I answer the question, "What is God by saying 'Mu!'" How would I know this answer is not satisfactory if the question itself does not know, and cannot know, what it takes in and what it leaves out? If I ask the color of the stone hidden in Śākyamuni's pocket, I have some idea of the question's limits. I do not know the color of the stone, nor even all the colors, but I do know what a color is and I can distinguish a color from a sound or anything else. And I know that stones have colors. The question, in a word, already contains the answer ontically; the question determines the very level at which the answer is an answer and through which the answer must pass, so to speak. The question fixes the limits of the answer and also gives the conditions of its intelligibility. Only what is possible to ask is asked because the limits of the answer are already known.

For this reason, many religious traditions admit that to seek God implies having already found him. To ask about him means, in a way, to know him already. The unquestionable cannot be questioned, and if the Absolute is questionable, it is no longer absolute. In other words, a real question about the nature of the Absolute cannot grasp its limits and can offer no criteria by which the answer might be verified, as modern parlance would put it. The question does not know what it is asking; it is not a question.

This comes down to saying that I am asking nothing, and not just nothingness. This in effect destroys the question, for in asking nothing there no question. All the meaning I find in the question is the meaning I inject into it, a meaning the questioner gives, but certainly not the meaning of the question itself.

And now we near the end of the Buddha's catharsis. The meaning of the question is not the question's meaning, but the meaning the questioner gives it, his anguish, his insecurity, his doubts. He projects into a question a problem that the question does not contain and cannot contain or support. So what is to be done?

What the Buddha does is very clear. He makes us understand that the real question destroys itself and in so doing ceases to be a question and frees us to go directly onto the path of deliverance. To be sure, by destroying the question he has also destroyed the questioner, the little ego who had identified himself with his question. What is to be done then? To make Man aware of his limits, to center him on what he can do, not to distract him from his human task, not to allow him to become dissipated by and in his speculation, to make him lose the ego that would have him believe himself a little God. The Tathāgata repeats his theme constantly: to show Man the path to deliverance. He removes Man's obsession with orthodoxy in order to return him to *orthopraxis*; to the Eightfold Path that leads him to liberation because it eliminates the obstacles—the contingency—and is not preoccupied with the rest.

Must we then renounce all intelligibility? Neither the Buddha nor Buddhism would say that. I have just sought the dialectic of the matter: The very question destroys itself as a question. But this is an existential operation in which reason by itself can do very little. How does one silence the *logos*? Certainly the *logos* does not silence itself. The *logos* must not be silenced outright; it must simply recognize that there is a gate it must not cross, that it can eat of all the fruits of paradise, save one: God cannot be named. Much more: Man must recognize that there is no need to name God, that the question is not even raised and that, if raised, it shows I am falling into the *hubris* of believing myself to be a little God who can question God and ask him to justify or explain himself.

These are all metaphors. The question is raised as well at the altogether deeper level of being and Being. God certainly *is* not in any sense we can give this concept. But the Buddha does not say it in this way, for he never loses sight of the existential and personal level on



which he speaks. He sets forth no theory. The problem of God does not lie in the realm of theory. It does not belong to the realm of the word, but to the kingdom of silence.

I would answer our philosophical query in this way on behalf of the Buddha: The principle of sufficient reason forbids us to name God in any way whatsoever.

The new question would be: Is the Man who no longer questions still a Man, or has he become an angel or a beast? Is pure quest not the quintessence of the *humanum*?

The Buddha does not reduce the word to silence, nor does he speak of a word of silence; rather he helps us discover the silence of the word: *The Buddha smiles!*

### Three Remaining Problems and One Hypothesis

Is it still meaningful to speak of God when one has understood what the Buddha says? Can we consider the name of God a stage in the awakening of human consciousness? Can there be faith without an object?

Can we regain lost innocence? Is salvation possible without thought of God? Can Man cease to raise the ultimate and definite question?

Would the Buddha agree with someone who does not speak of God, but who adds that the word (*logos*), the image (*icon*), is the pole required for dialogue and is called "Man"? Can there be a cross-fertilization between silence and the word? Would it be the smile? The lurking hypothesis is the following. Since that extraordinary affirmation of Aristotle,<sup>19</sup> as transformed by Augustine,<sup>20</sup> commented on in his own way by Lessing<sup>21</sup> and underscored by Heidegger,<sup>22</sup> the West seems to see the human condition as the constant search of asking what Being is: Man is a questioning being.<sup>23</sup> Since the no less extraordinary affirmation of

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Arist. *Metaph.* VII.1 (1028 b 2–4): *καὶ δὴ καὶ τὸ πάλαι τε καὶ νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ ζητούμενον καὶ ἀεὶ ἀπορούμενον, τί τὸ ὄν, τοῦτ' ἐστὶ τίς ἡ οὐσία.*

"Et quod olim et nunc et semper quaesitum est et semper dubitandum, quid est ens, hoc est quae substantia" [And indeed, that which was searched for since antiquity, but which is also now and always will be, which is at the same time always without a way out [an aporia, in doubt?] (that is, what is being? viz. what is substance?).]

Heidegger's translation is interesting (and significantly enough he does not quote the second interrogation): "Und so bleibt also auch von altersher und so auch jetzt und immerfort ein Gesuchtes und damit ein solches, das keine Auswege bietet (dies): was ist das Seiende. . . ."

I may give two standard translations of this "längst vergessenen Satz" (Heidegger): "And indeed the question which was raised of old and is raised now and always, and is always the subject of doubt, viz. what being is, is just the question, what is substance?" (R. McKeon). "Y en efecto lo que antiguamente y ahora y siempre se ha buscado y siempre ha sido objeto de duda: que es el Ente, is the equivalent of: ¿qué es la Substancia?" (V.-García Yebra).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. his famous "Quaestio mihi factus sum."

<sup>21</sup> Cf. his often-quoted passage of *Eine Duplik* that if God would hold in his right hand all truth and in his left the constant struggling for it, he would choose the latter (*Gesammelte Werke*, ed. K. Lachman and F. Munzer, XIII.23).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. M. Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken?* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1954), 128, where he quotes Aristotle and refers to his previous comments on the passage in his previous work *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Heidegger's *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (1953; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1966): "Die Leidenschaft des Wissens ist das Fragen" (p. 122), and again, "Das Fragen ist die echte und einzige Weise der Würdigung dessent was aus hostem Rang unser Dasein in der Macht halt" (p. 63; emphasis added). I may copy here my own marginal notes on those two pages—wondering about other possible "Grundhaltungen": "Leidenschaft" des Wissens oder des Noch-nicht wissens? Es gäbe keine letzte Frage

the Buddha—matched by the Upaniṣads, the Tao, and later traditions—the East seems to see the human condition as the ontological confidence in a Reality that has no way of approach: Man is real when he shares in that Reality that does not allow for the alienation that the mere questioning would create. Man realizes his proper status only when all words have been spoken and he reenters into the Silence.

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(es wire ein Widerspruch), es gibt aber eine *sancta ignorantia*: And 'Warum nicht die Anbetung? oder die nichtsund nicht-fngende Beschauung? oder sogar liebender Gehorsam?' To smile is not the same as to laugh!" Heidegger would probably agree that the "Leidenschaft des Fragens" and "das Fragen als ein Grundgeschehnis des geschichtlichen Seins" (p. 109) belongs to the "Grundstellungen des Geistes des Abendlandes" (p. 89) and cannot be called a human invariant. Or had he second thoughts when he coined that famous phrase at the very end of his lecture "Die Fraae nach der Tecknik": "Denn das Fragen ist die Frömmigkeit des Denkens" (*Vorträge und Aufsätze* [Pfullingen: Neske, 1954], p. 1:36).

Or again would Heidegger say "that *Besinnung* is the Wisdom I have been speaking about" when he concedes that such contemplation "den Charakter des Fragens verliert und zum einfachen Sagen wird"? (op. cit., p. 62). That Heidegger was almost obsessed with the question of the question is patent since the first pages of *Sein und Zeit*. Cf. also the last sentences of *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), both the course (p. 188) and the lecture (p. 211) referring to "die Frage." And yet later on (December 1957) he quotes again the same sentence, "Questioning is the piety of thinking," and adds that this phrase is already in the wake of what I would consider his more "oriental" attitude, namely, "Dass das Fragen nicht die eigentliche Gebärde des Denkens ist, sondern das Hören der Zusage dessen, was in die Frage kommen soll," *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 5th ed. (Pfullingen: Neske, 1975), 175. Is this totally compatible with the by now totally "Indian" assertion: "Das Denken ist kein Mittel für das Erkennen" (p. 173)? I am saying this because he did not put a full stop after "Zusage." And this is what he really says a few pages below (pp. 180ff.). The later Heidegger seems to subscribe to the metaphor "Das Denken zieht Furchen in den Acker des Seins" (p. 173).



## SECTION II

### THE SILENCE OF BUDDHA\*

#### *A Religious A-Theism*

*It is not thanks to silence (mona) that a man becomes wise (muni) if he is confused and ignorant. Wise is the man who, holding the balance, chooses good and eschews evil.<sup>1</sup>*

*Our greatest need is to make silence. . . .  
The only language God usually hears is the Silence of Love.*

*—St. John of the Cross,  
Letter of November 22, 1587, to Anna of  
Jesus, a nun of the convent of Beas*

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\* This edition is based on the new extended Italian version of the book (Mondadori, 2006). English translation by Geraldine Clarkson and Fabrice Olivier Dubosc. Previous publication: *The Silence of God: The Answer of the Buddha* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

<sup>1</sup> Dh XIX.13, 14 (268, 269).



## FOREWORD

*sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ kusallassa  
upasampadā sacittapariyodapanaṃ etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ.*<sup>1</sup>

This book is part of another, more complete, and extensive work, which the uproars of life have not allowed me to conclude.\* It would have been titled "The Silent Messages."

The occasion for the present breach of silence was my contribution to an encyclopaedia on contemporary atheism.<sup>2</sup> My short essay on Buddhism and atheism<sup>3</sup> has here expanded to an entire monograph.

I would like to emphasize that I do not claim to offer solutions or advocate a thesis—let alone engage in any apologetics for Christianity, propaganda for Buddhism, or defense of atheism. I only wish to offer a series of suggestions and hypotheses, the result of philosophical and theological research, in the hope that these reflections may bear some fruit. At the same time, I hope to be faithful to Buddhist intuitions, without straying from Christian experience, and without cloistering myself away from the contemporary cultural world—no slight ambition, to be sure, nor one that should be attempted without commensurate humility. The first act of faithfulness will demand that the author, admonished by the Awakened One, simply vanish. The Christian filiation will call for a Trinitarian experience, lived personally. The third vocation will require a sacred respect for the concrete situation of contemporary humankind. The price for the audacity of attempting such weaving can only be one's own life—a life not considered as ultimate so that one may dare to risk its loss.<sup>4</sup>

The following pages, then, should not be regarded as a work of erudition, but as the fruit of experience and a manifestation of life. Perhaps out of shyness, such experience and manifestation have been clothed in culture and philosophy to be presentable in public. What the author really wishes to say, he fails to utter. Silence, too, is communicative. A book about silence will not be a contradiction, yet the way in which it is understood and asserted may indeed be contradictory: the leap to reality is a mortal leap. No testimony is possible other than the testimony of death. This was the lesson of the Buddha. For this Christ died on the Cross.

The *muni* (ascetics) of India, who spend years and years in absolute silence, do not speak, but very often write and put into writing their answers to the visitors' questions. Just as no word says anything except when emerging from silence, so silence is silent only when it knows how to take flesh and manifest itself without thereby melting away. This would be my hope.

Vārāṇasī, 1996

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<sup>1</sup> "Avoid sin, practice good, purify the mind: this is the message of Buddha."

<sup>2</sup> Girardi (1967–1970), vol. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 4:449–76.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Matt 10:39; 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; 17:33; Jn 12:25. These passages are not to be understood in the sense of a kind of "preventive therapy" or "life insurance," but simply as an echo of Acts 20:24 and, especially, Jn 15:13.

## PREFACE TO THE SECOND ENGLISH EDITION

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato  
sammāsambuddhasa.*<sup>1</sup>

This study, compared to the first Spanish edition of 1970, is practically a new book. Many modifications have been introduced in addition to those that appeared in the first Italian edition (1985, ed. U. M. Vesci), the first English edition (1989), and the German edition (1992).

The present work belongs to the category of so-called theologies of liberation, though with a much broader meaning since it suggests avenues toward liberation both in the human realm and in the realm of theology. Its aim is to offer a wider horizon that may serve both to promote a deeper understanding of the theology of liberation as well as of the liberation of theology (and philosophy), and also a broader application of its insights. Liberation, after all, was the central concern of Gautama the Buddha. The theology of liberation, I wrote a long time ago, must go hand in hand with the liberation of an exclusively Christian theology.

This English edition comes four decades after the work was originally conceived. At the time, its writing represented an existential passage in my life. Since then I have never recanted my Buddhism, still remaining Christian and Hindū, in the awareness that I have not ended my pilgrimage.

Silvano Panunzio titled his insightful review of the 1985 Italian edition "The Silence of Panikkar . . . and God's Answer." He feared I had gone too far (at least from a Christian standpoint). My rejoinder was that I would never dare to give "God's answer." That would have meant indeed going too far, from any standpoint. I have only related the Buddha's message to our modern predicament, neither rejecting Christ nor denying allegiance to other traditions.

Why should we build walls of separation and feel jealous about constituencies? To extol one religious and human tradition does not mean to belittle the others. Synthesis may seem unlikely and sometimes impossible, but what is urgent and important is not the unity of religions but their harmony.

The radius, for example, is not commensurate with the circumference, but both are real and mutually related. Each circumference has a radius, and yet it cannot be measured by it. The circumference is transcendent to the radius. Before numbers (like  $\pi$ ) were called irrational, they were called *numeri surdi* (deaf) and even *ficti* (fictitious, that is, untrue numbers). Likewise, we cannot measure the circumference of God with the radius of Buddhism or Christianity.

But I am not attempting to do in the field of religion what Cantor, Dedekind, and many others have done in the field of mathematics. I am certainly not advocating either a *mathesis universalis* or a universal religion. I am simply making room for incommensurability because there is no need to measure everything. The Dhammapada<sup>2</sup> refers to *nirvāṇa* as the unreachable region (*agata disa*), the untrodden country. The radius will never reach the circumference! The finite and the infinite are incommensurable but nevertheless compatible.

<sup>1</sup> "Veneration to the blessed, saint, perfect, and completely awakened": traditional invocation to the Buddha in the Buddhist writings in Pāli language.

<sup>2</sup> DH XXIII.4 (323).

Since the first edition of this book, much has been written on Buddhism. I have myself given courses and seminars on the subject. Yet I have made no attempt to incorporate new data and thoughts into this second edition. Every book has a certain unity, and the harmony of this work would suffer if I were to cram it with new material. What is important in any given study of this type is not so much the amount of new information but the original insight. We should not fall prey to the modern scientific distortion of reducing the value of a philosophical study to its consonance with the most recent publications. I am not defending a-temporal truths, but I am saying that thirty-five years of testing are a valid criterion to evaluate the present work.

Having resisted the temptation of writing too much, I shall also resist the temptation of saying too little. The additional pages are only meant to clarify and modify the first book. In entrusting what I have written to the reader, I put my hope in a creative discernment (*intus-legere*) that might bring him, through a courageous "ascending of the stream,"<sup>3</sup> to the Source.

If I have not yielded to the temptation of falling into silence, I owe it to the intuition of the *advaita* relationship between silence and word. This a-dual relationship is free from the subordination of the spirit to *logos* and of *logos* to the spirit. That which we "cannot" speak of is probably the only thing that confers the serene joy necessary to attempt our babbling in order to avoid the vanity of logomachy.

Or, to speak in more academic and prosaic terms, this work is meant to be of service both to Buddhist studies and to those contemporaries who feel the urgency to go beyond modernity without necessarily having to return to past ages.

It is also superfluous to say that rereading the text has meant a new gestation. The author has renewed the strong and liberating experience of contingency. I refer to the contingency of being as much as of thought, will, and word. Not all that falls under the experience of consciousness can be verbalized. We realize an aspect of reality that we cannot express adequately with words, something that is present to our spirit but is beyond our mind's capabilities. We realize that God cannot be an object either of the mind or of the will without ceasing to be what he claims to be. God is not an object.

Where is all this leading? First, I do not want to lead anywhere. This would mean remaining in the last stage, the voluntaristic stage that, after Nietzsche, practically shapes the post-Platonic-Aristotelian-Kantian Western culture. It is not through the will to venture beyond that we will succeed in overcoming the present situation. What we need is a more feminine—and, from a Christian standpoint, I would say a more Marian—attitude. The *fiat* is not an act of will but the acceptance of grace.<sup>4</sup> Hope is not an act of the will nor of the mind. It would not otherwise be hope but mere waiting, more or less resigned, more or less plausible. The hope of *nirvāṇa* does not consist in desiring it—and neither does it consist in not desiring it; that would still be in the sphere of willpower. Hope, as I have said, is not of the future but of the invisible. It is the very aspiration of Being unquenched by the desires of the mind.

Second, the solution will not be found in moving elsewhere; in such case, we would be dealing with a *fuga mundi*, an escape from the human condition and an alienation of man.

The similitude of mutation, which I have often referred to, is not exact and could lead to error if interpreted according to evolution as the appearance of a new species. The leap required is much greater.

Many religious traditions of humanity have invited man to dare such a leap—a leap beyond history. Very often, however, they have yielded to the temptation of describing it,

<sup>3</sup> DH XVI.10 (218).

<sup>4</sup> Lk 1:28.



and in their wish to transcend history they have fallen into geography, even sometimes into a geography of the "beyond."

It is extremely significant that, if the life of man is more than history, it is also more than geography—even heavenly geography.

The leap is beyond time and space. Hence it is not even a leap.

There is, moreover, nowhere to go. It is clearly not a question of whereabouts; we are just playing with words. It is not a question of partiality, that is, of merely saving the soul, the individual, society, or matter, but it is a question of the whole. "Μελέτα τὸ πᾶν" (be concerned with the whole), said one of the seven sages of Greece (Periandrus of Corinth).

Third, the issue at stake does not consist in achieving a goal, reaching an end. "As Cervantes suggests, the road is more pleasant than the inn," Ortega y Gasset reminded us on January, 14, 1922.

The *nirvāṇa* is to be found nowhere, nor at the end of anything; it has neither geography nor history.

We cannot deny that man is history; he makes history and lives in history. At the same time, however, I do not believe we can assert that man is only history and that there is not "something" in him that transcends history and that can be considered "outside" time and space.

Since we live in a civilization without a future (neither the human race nor the planet can withstand our present lifestyle), the goal may appear catastrophic. We understand, therefore, why Western man who lives immersed in the myth of history feels such attraction for those cultures that do not live for the future.

The attraction that Westerners feel for Buddhism can have many immediate and practical causes: movies, the exile of the Tibetan people, the Japanese economic success. Its ultimate reason, however, should be traced to the widespread and amorphous perception peculiar to Western society, the feeling that it has reached the end of its circumnavigation and that it is consuming all its resources, in the widest sense of the word. I refer not only to Heidegger, to ecological awareness, or to "New Age" realms (to cite heterogeneous examples). I also refer to consumerism, capitalism, and technocracy. In all of these areas there is the feeling that we are about to reach a limit, that we are nearing a wall that, invisible and elusive as it may be, is nevertheless real.

The present study does not assert that Buddhism is the solution. Anyone choosing to consider it an apology for Buddhism would only betray my intentions. This, however, is not the main point. It is not a book on Buddhism, but on the deep consciousness of contemporary man, which may be defined simply as religious consciousness.

Without insisting on the word "religion," this study presents an aspect of our contemporary situation in which Gods, Men, and Matter are all implicated in an interdependent circumcession. The Earth has shown her limitations, the Gods have revealed their imperfections, and Men have lost the illusion of being the saviors of humanity. Science, Religions, and Politics have all lost their power of salvation.

The temptation, whether strong or weak, of letting it all go to rack and ruin and falling into nihilism is very clear. Nevertheless, this "hope against any hope" still continues to exist—those who love feel it, those who believe experience it, those who despair put it to the test. Humanity senses that another degree of hope is possible.

In this book I have not tried to theorize on Buddhism in general, except for the problem of God with which we are concerned. I will only submit this hypothesis concerning a comparative cosmivision: there is a deep similitude between Buddhism and Christianity. Both, but especially Buddhism, go beyond the immanence/transcendence paradigm. A certain form of Christianity has attempted to do so by freeing itself from Jewish and Greek mentoring,

but it has never managed to become dominant in Christian religion. That is why this book hopes that a mutual fecundation may find on this level an auspicious ground.

One of the great metaphysical revolutions at the dawn of Christian insight, with its effort to claim independent ground from both the Jewish and the Greek vision, was to address transcendence by transforming it into another polarity of immanence, that is, of Trinity, as can be seen in much of the mystic current, from Cappadocia to Rhineland and beyond. But the mainstream upheld the historical stance, and Christianity could not avoid the support of a cosmology. The Trinitarian insight was atrophied and transformed in a psychological concept. The Incarnation doctrine stressed almost exclusively divine immanence, and the Second Coming was supposed to close the circle. The deep insight of the Buddha speaks a different language that might find resonance in the archetypes sleeping in the Western soul.

I could disseminate famous and illustrious names throughout this introduction not so much to explain their ideas on the Buddha or the Christ or on their respective religions but to illustrate their convictions and personal doubts. I will not betray confidences but only assert that the problem of God, the question of the Absolute, of Nothingness, or simply of the meaning of life are universal, as well as very intimate and personal, preoccupations. "The problem of God is not a theoretical problem but a personal one," wrote Zubiri.<sup>5</sup> There is a personal level that transcends, or, better said, is before or simply deeper than our ideas or even our (more or less official) religious affiliations. The manifestations of *Homo religiosus* are not all "religious," and even under the clothes there is a human skin that feels in its very nakedness the enigma of life, the cold of death, the longing of unsaid words, the regret of deeds not done, the simple doubt in the face of the unknown. There is a certain reserve—rather more cultural than personal—in talking about the ultimate horizon of which we are all equally ignorant. Opinions unite and divide men, but the communion of ignorance has no gaps. I can say that such personal confidences have nourished the pages of this book even though the philosophical metabolism has transformed them in academic propositions.

Moreover, it has been necessary to overcome two more obstacles. When the world situation is such as it is, when the urgency of needed remedies does not allow for delay, when practical action becomes impellent, entertaining theoretical concerns may appear as an irresponsible luxury.

The answer to this objection consists in denying the dichotomy and showing that, without an underlying theory, praxis in itself does not stand. The answer from the standpoint of praxis would be confessing that this book is in itself the fruit of practice. And my personal reaction has always been to live what I write and to write what I have lived—with no further presumption.

The second obstacle derives from the very answer I have just given. When so much has been written, is it worth such effort? Is it worth it to enlarge on a theme on which intellectuals have already thought and men of action have already acted, considering that the subject matter may not even be particularly interesting to other mortals?

I could justify myself naively by saying that I am doing and writing something new, but this would not be convincing. If what I do and say is new, tomorrow it will no longer be so. Novelty, moreover, is no criterion of truth or efficacy, rather the opposite. It would be absurd to think that humanity had to wait for what I might have to say or do.

If I only ruminate on the old or imitate others, my effort would be worth even less, unless we are talking about a work of divulgation or a work conceived to uphold a militant position, which would be perfectly legitimate.

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<sup>5</sup> Zubiri (1985), p. 116.

The temptation of silence is even stronger when one discovers that a growing number of authors are beginning to treat the issue with greater seriousness and that active groups are also arising. By reading many authors and getting to know many movements, one realizes that the issue lies not in this or that opinion on God or Buddha or any such thing, but that the question is the very destiny of humanity and that the problem has roots that go back thousands of years, well before the beginning of history. Who can therefore be sure that his own diagnosis has solid enough foundations?

This *agnôsia* and this *skêpsis* have swept away my indecision and have helped to dissolve my doubts, at least in part. It is because we are dealing with something that has to do with human destiny that all those who feel the need to do or say something should give it a try—as long as, obviously, they have lived the problem in their own flesh, considered it in their mind, and lived it in their hearts. In such case, one does not know whether he is saying something new or old. You only feel that your writing has managed to become a genuine expression of what you are, and therefore it is not necessary to justify what you write, just as we should not justify our existence. This book speaks of all these things.

The subtitle stresses that Buddhism is not theistic in the current sense of the word, rather it is almost the opposite: a-theism does not acknowledge any superior agency, whereas Buddhism is pure relationality. We have added the adjective "religious," which is practically an oximoron, inasmuch as religion binds (Latin *religa*) whereas atheism unbinds from any vertical bond.

Since the first edition of this book it has rained much (intellectually); there have been many storms (existentially) and many floods (sociologically), and many flowers have grown (personally) in the Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

This work does not deal directly with such issues, although there has been a latent, implicit dialogue that has allowed us to state the problems as we do, in our times and in this place, well aware that there is such a thing as sociology of knowledge.

However, I feel that an observation is called for concerning the place of dialogue. Such a place is not the doctrinal arena, nor even the ethical or cosmological one. Such a place, dependent as it may be on the coordinates we have mentioned, lies in the ultimate experience of man toward reality—experience that both traditions call ineffable but that both flood with words. Sometimes the inverse path is also recommended, bringing the words back to the silence from which they originated.

Without a taste for silence, words lose their savor.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

As in other writings also, when I write "man" I refer to *puruṣa*, *anthrōpos*, *homo*, *Mensch*, and I do not accept that the word be related only to the male.

We have opted for a precise transliteration in order to avoid the pitfalls of unconscious colonialism or pragmatic pan-economicism through adherence to our European languages only, ignoring the others that in our self-sufficient provincialism we consider exotic. I cannot repress my indignation when I read contemporary works, serious and well-written works, that do not take the trouble to use diacritical signs because "scholars who know languages such as Sanskrit and Pāli do not need the diacritical marks to identify words, and persons who do not know these languages gain little from having the marks reproduced." Many words like *kala* (weak, indistinct), *kalā* (a little part and also art), and *kāla* (time, destiny, and also black man)—or *raddha* (faith, trust) and *raddha* (faith, but rather more a funerary ceremony complementary to the *antiesti*)—do not mean the same thing, and so forth. However, to avoid complicating beyond measure the transliteration from Sanskrit and Pāli, we have refrained in certain cases from transliterating the retroflex consonants. With a few exceptions, for all numbers and cases we have used the nominative singular.

As for the Sanskrit pronunciation, we only say that the *ṛ* is a semivowel (*ṛta* is pronounced "rita" with a soft *r* as in the English "rich"); *ṣ* is palatal and *ś* cerebral, both similar to the English "sh" (as in "shock"); and the *c* is palatal (*cakra* is pronounced *chakra*). The *h* after a consonant is voiceless and aspirated—it is soft, and it joins the preceding vowel to form a single letter—whereas the nasal consonants (*ṭ*, *ṣ*, *ṇ*) have a dot underneath (or above), so the final *ṇ* of *Nirvāṇa* is pronounced as in the French *fin*.

Lastly, we must point out that the aim of the many notes is to increase the ability to move beyond the provincialism that still reigns in some spheres. It is necessary to overcome the caricatures that are often used to portray Eastern and Western traditions. Many of the notes and quotes serve only to make the tradition accessible and to communicate with the reader, although, in actual fact, almost all the text has been written independently from them. Other notes, on the other hand, are intended to highlight some problems in order to explore them or to invite readers to consider in further depth the issues in question. Intercultural studies are only beginning. This book aims to offer a useful tool for research.

The translations from the Sanskrit are mine but have been compared as much as possible with existing versions.

## INTRODUCTION

*That silence may answer  
A silent request must precede it.  
But each silent request  
gathers in silence the question itself.  
And if the question disappears  
there is no answer:  
only a look,  
a smile,  
it is love,  
forgiveness;  
everything,  
nothing,  
yes,  
no.  
The Absence.<sup>1</sup>*

Although it may not appear so at first sight, this book reflects a good portion of its author's spiritual journey, now spanning half a century. It is in some way an autobiography, in which the *autos* is typical of our age, the *bios* represents the life of three major cultural forces of our time, and the *graphia* is not the anecdote but an echo of our common human condition.

### Autos

I speak, then, not of the isolated individual (this modern Western dogma), but of the human person (the web of relationships, the thread in a network that can be infinitely woven). I speak of that *autos* that is not limited by the idiosyncratic solipsism of individuality, but which expresses in a unique, though limited, way the whole of reality. Such "self," the *ātman*, is not the ego, nor is the *autos* the negation of the other, but the affirmation of what one is, of what we are.

I have said that the *autos* is typical, and therefore personal. When I began the work of writing this book, early in the 1960s, I had already reached the confluence of Christianity and Hinduism, but my personal identity was not yet sufficiently worked out, nor had I as yet been freed from unassimilated circumstantial elements of secondary importance. I had still to experience—in intellectual depth and existential intensity—both that great post-Christian phenomenon called atheism and that great post-Hinduist phenomenon called Buddhism. It is only now, many years later, that I am aware of the profound meaning of my odyssey.

I have never consciously planned my personal adventure; thus I regard it, in its quintessence, as typical of our age. This book reflects something of that adventure. One need only

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<sup>1</sup> Ten years after writing this introduction I happened to read the poem *Respuestas* by the Spanish poet Ricardo Molina, who recently passed away: "And what if the answer were found / in the question itself? / What if divine silence / were celestial acquiescence? / What if our salvation / lie in the asking?" in *ABC* (Madrid), January 1968.

change such generic nouns as Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, and atheism to other, more personal ones in order to grasp what I am attempting to show here. We need only think of our disappointments in our own traditions, of the quest for identity beyond traditional frontiers, of the consequent disorientation and of the almost forced renunciation of concern with transcendental problems, not only for lack of time, but often enough for want of interest in their baroque forms and their estrangement from real life. We need only think of contemporary literature, plastic arts, music, and so on, their breaching of every rule to make room for a multitude of new forms. The contemporary world is at least partly characterized by an inner fracture, a laceration artificially numbed by technological expedients.

The *autos* is certainly personal rather than individual. If I have called it typical, it is not because I hold it forth as a model for imitation, but because, in spite of imperfection and even error, to me it seems paradigmatic of our generation, and perhaps also of those to come. After all, what is truth, on the experiential level, but truthfulness?

The *autos* of this autobiography, then, is made up of the considerable and ever-growing number of contemporary men and women, both North and South, East and West, who appear to have lost, or at least lost sight of, the life-unifying myth. It is made up of men who have had to struggle to gain their "identity" and have seen the legacy of their respective traditional cultures subjected to radical critique. The African situation is different from the Asian state of affairs, and these in turn differ from the situation in the West. Yet everywhere, tradition is threatened. And although traditional elements often survive in the more or less conscious strata of the human psyche, both individual and collective, humanity's ancient traditions are now unable to confer personal identity to an ever growing number of our contemporaries. Today the traditional dimension is in crisis, and man can only reach full self-awareness by subjecting tradition to a radical critique.

To subject something to critique means to submit it to the scrutiny of our consciousness, in order to arrive, through discernment, at a conviction capable of giving direction to our thinking and ultimately to our life. Now, the core of such modern scrutiny of tradition is not so much the academician's den, or the thinker's brain, but the dynamism of life itself, and the heart of the common person. It is our very contemporary human existence that sieves the legacy of tradition. Democracy, science, technology, the modern state, exoteric spiritualities, and so forth are but so many other names for this challenge to tradition. The impact is shattering. We are no longer in a position to accept, casually and confidently and with naive trust, what our elders teach. But neither are we able to leave off believing in something, even if that something is nothing. In short, the old has had its time, and the new has no footing. Indeed, *modernity* has increasingly exhibited its characteristic as a mode, a fashion, an ephemeral impermanence. We have passed the point of no return and cannot go back.

The remedy does not lie in some revolution, in overthrowing the situation, but in a liberation from the slavery of this very situation in order to create something new. Each revolution is, in actual fact, basically conservative. It overthrows a situation, it tears down institutions, but it preserves basic structures. In other words, the remedy does not consist in an iconoclastic behavior, but in a critical attitude. The former aspires to the destruction of what it regards as evil. The latter strives for the discernment of possible ambiguities. An iconoclastic attitude very often provokes a reaction in the opposite direction. The critical attitude, on the other hand, stimulates change, even radical change. To confound the two would be lethal.

It goes without saying that the word "critical" here is not meant in the usual sense of "criticizing" (giving an unfavorable, or even petty, judgment), nor even in the sense of a purely theoretical judgment, but rather as the praxis that submits human actions to the

existential scrutiny of life. There is no criticism without such a sieve, but the sieve must have hands to shake it.

In the name of common sense, man has often chosen to forgo the critical stance, for fear of falling into a destructive iconoclastic attitude—and this fact has been exploited by the defenders of the status quo. Any criticism of Latin American policies, for example, has been accused of "communism" in many Latin American countries, just as any attempt at a reform of socialism was labeled as "fascist" in the "Second World." What does it mean to be a Christian or a Hindu today? What does it mean to be a "believer"? Is submitting papal policy to scrutiny a sufficient condition to be questioned as a Catholic? Must one venerate the *sangha* in order to be a good Buddhist? Is belief in God the only form of religion? Must one accept military service in order to be a good citizen? Must one believe in a hereafter in order to lead a moral life? Do religions have a monopoly on the religious stance?

The passage or transition, the *pascha*, from a basic conception of reality to another is not achieved easily without dangers and traumas. Perhaps (fortunately?) such transition can never be achieved completely. As much as we may seek to dissimulate our origins, our archetypes betray us and perhaps save us, in forcing us to realize that personal identity is not simply the result of a choice, but the ripe fruit of a whole life. Inasmuch as we try to divest ourselves of the past and to deny our old beliefs, the karma of the paths we have trodden, some of them centuries old, continues to adhere to our being. Language demonstrates this with a vengeance. We may wish, for example, to exalt labor, or convince ourselves that labor is simply the result of a force in motion. But the very word speaks of toil, travail, even torture. We may learn a new language, or even more than one, but our native tongue never loses its privileged status.

Contemporary Western man feels all the weakness of theism and is equally skeptical of atheism as a response to the ultimate questions on the meaning of existence. Eastern man has suffered greatly from the distortions of his traditions, yet he resists acceptance *in toto* of foreign solutions based on a merely "scientific" view of reality. African man suffers from an inferiority complex imposed by long centuries of colonization and slavery, yet as he adopts modernity he awakens to the fearful suspicion that the cure may be worse than the disease. Latin Americans have suffered the Christian betrayal, but mistrust Marxist messianisms.

We must all achieve our identity on the basis of a radical authenticity. The typical is not the topical. The paradigmatic is not the commonplace. Symbol is not sign. And perhaps this is one of the values of this autobiography—to symbolize a good part of the destiny of contemporary man in his quest for an identity that will enable him to discover an *idem* that will be neither his own ego nor an *aliud*. The first stifles, the second alienates. Atheism stultifies. Theism numbs.

The *autos*, I repeat, is neither the individual nor a sociologically relevant group of individuals, but rather the human person understood as the microcosm where the drama of the universe is being staged. And a person is thought as well as action. *Theory alone*, mere thinking, a mere shift in awareness (even "conscientization") without an accompanying praxis, is not only impotent, but shortsighted. It sees only what its limited situation permits it to see. At the same time, praxis alone, the mere change of structures (including revolution) without a concomitant theory, is not only blind but also incapable of effectuating any meaningful transformation. It changes only the order of factors and the persons in charge, but the underlying patterns abide. Only in the real world of the person—neither singular nor plural—are the crucial factors influencing the course of the universe at play.

And it is precisely contemporary consciousness that is suffering a radical crisis of planetary proportions. Faith in a fatherly, protective, good, and almighty God is declining. (Nor does a mother-God, despite certain advantages, resolve the crisis.) On the other hand, confidence

in the goodness, intelligence, and power of humankind is also weakening. Hope in a sort of natural wisdom or in the spontaneity of things is no longer viable. The traditional concepts of *God*, *Man*, and *World* as separate entities are crumbling everywhere. But nihilism, as the conclusion of a syllogism in which all premises are erroneous, is only a groundless ideology, the result of volatile and reactive anger.

The contemporary human *autos* is genuinely in crisis. Certain small groups may still manage to believe themselves safe (or "saved," which explains the proliferation of certain sects), but not even they can ignore the fact that humanity as a whole has embarked on one and the same adventure. Partial solutions may be considered as viable emergency solutions, but they do not cease to be partial, that is, heretical. We are all bound together in a common life. And so we come to the *bios* of this hidden autobiography.

### Bios

Yesterday the interconnection of human life was more a theoretical intuition than something verified. Today it is an existential fact. We are all related, not only in the order of being, but in the order of eating and breathing, not to mention thinking and believing. It is impossible to isolate ourselves from the influences of the world around us, in every sense of the expression. Nor do I refer only to the mass media, with their potential for manipulation. I refer also to that more subtle factor that renders such media both possible and effective: the human need to rely on something superior. The problem is not television but the human attitude making it possible for television to be a success. It may not even be a question of attitude but rather a compulsive situation.

Modern life is characterized neither by calmness nor by peaceful reflection. We are subjected to a continuous cultural bombing that brings to mind those modern bombs that kill or maim the living but leave their buildings intact, only to crumble later for lack of anyone to maintain them. In like manner, institutions, customs, and myths are gradually emptied of meaning, leaving only their empty shells. When suddenly everything collapses, the just always pays the price for the sinner.

It is not our grandparents who threaten our lifestyle. If they have sometimes tried to do so, they have been defeated. It is our grandchildren who challenge the meaning of modern society, however strenuous (and, at times, correct) may be our efforts to justify ourselves. But the field of our crisis is neither the individual nor the generational, but the cultural. The crisis lies in the most personal core of human existence. The problem is much deeper than might appear at first sight. It is more than political, economic, or merely institutional. Weighing in the balance are the past six thousand years of human experience. The collapse of ancient civilizations was not total because they bequeathed their legacy to their successors. This is no longer the case. If contemporary civilization, now attempting to become planetary, crumbles, there will be no "empire" left to pick up its legacy, no one to claim victory.

No culture, and no religion, can solve the human problem all by itself. Man is not only white or Marxist or male. Human identity can no longer be defined in terms of civilization, Christianity, education, or national or imperial citizenship; hence the urgent need for a mutual fecundation of human traditions, such as I have been advocating for decades. We are mutually connected, and the solution to the human problem will never come from one direction alone. The "*salus ex judaeis*" principle ("salvation is of the Jews"<sup>2</sup>), may have been valid for the Samaritans of times past, but it is not a universal principle. Salvation comes from

<sup>2</sup> Jn 4:22.



above and from below; it comes from the right and the left, from within and from without. All messianism is suspect.

Three great traditions meet and interlace in our time: the theistic, especially the monotheistic; the *nāstika* or nontheistic, especially the Buddhist; and a sort of two-headed third tradition: the secular and atheistic. Their inevitable encounter produces waves that can sink many individual vessels, as well as tidal waves that can flood entire populations. The traditional *Homo religiosus* of the first two groups must come to terms with the *Homo secularis*, and the two together must explore the possibility of meeting in the acknowledgment of a reality without either shifting the center of gravity toward transcendence (not even if perceived as immanent), nor giving unilateral orientation to life following the merely empirical dimension (not even if it is called the future).

Are these distinct conceptions of the world compatible? How can we opt for any of them if we recognize that the others also contain elements of truth? Can they correct, perhaps even complement, one another? Is mutual fecundation sustainable? A mere juxtaposition, were it possible, would only create more of that cultural schizophrenia of which we already see many examples. To replace the principle of exclusion ("either-or") with the principle of indifferentiation ("as well as") is not the solution. We need to overcome both.

In a more or less conscious and direct way, a large segment of contemporary humanity is suffering the impact of these three great currents. This book seeks to express a fragment of the cultural *bias* of our century, through the description of a central issue of the contemporary crisis seen in the light of the teachings of a centuries-old tradition.

The original title of this work, *The Silence of God*, reflected the dismay of a considerable part of present-day humanity. God, in any of the possible declinations of this symbol (including that of a more or less absolute Future), may or may not exist. But it is certain that to many people God does appear superfluous or ineffective, deaf or at least mute, since He permits all manner of holocausts, injustice, and suffering. The divine, or the superhuman, if one prefers, has been an almost constant point of reference in human history, although subjected to different interpretations. Today it is this very point of reference that is being questioned. This is the problem of God, by whatever name God may be called: the question of the center of reality and the meaning of human life.

Many still call on God, but few expect an answer. The present crisis is manifested in a crisis of invocation. Theologians of diverse confessions and religions told us long ago that one cannot properly speak *of* God, but believers continue to speak *to* God, in invocation, appealing to Him not only to send rain or to heal their loved ones but also that God's will be done as well, or that God's kingdom come, at least in the form of a beneficent shower of greater justice and peace.

If one cannot properly speak of God because He is a mystery, if one cannot call on God because He does not respond, if second causes are all monopolized by scientific explanations of the present or the future, if the heart finds better comfort in human rather than in divine love, then what function is left to that which so many traditions have called God, no matter how we may try to purify the concept? Is it possible that, after many thousands of years, man has finally managed to crucify God or, more peacefully, to outgrow Him as a superfluous hypothesis? Are monotheists and their followers doomed to disappear from the face of the earth? Or will they be the ones to hurl themselves into a holy war against all "unbelievers"?

In the contemporary world, invocation—the raising of the heart in a plea for true love, the raising of the mind in a quest for salvific knowledge, and the raising of individual life in a cry for real help—is becoming increasingly *necessary* and at the same time increasingly *impossible*.

It is *necessary* because we cannot bear alone the weight of existence. Modern life is becoming ever more precarious. It is from such precarity that prayer is born, as etymology itself explains (both of these English words derive from the medieval Latin *precarious*, *precatio*). The collapse of the hierarchical structure of society is making it less and less possible for a wife to look upon her husband as a god (as still happens in traditional India), or for children to accept their parents as models, or for students to accept their teachers as superiors, or for laborers to accept their employers as more apt to direct. We know too much psychology, sociology, and history to ignore the errors and the hypocrisies of our "superiors." All the intermediate steps on the "superior-inferior stairway" have crumbled, if they have not disappeared altogether.

And yet the invocation to something superior becomes more necessary than ever. It is impossible for an individual to know everything or to control all the factors that enter into his life's configuration. He can place no confidence in his peers, who are as fragile and prone to failure as himself. Neither can he rely on society, for society itself is one of his greatest burdens. It is necessary to climb higher, to cry for help, to get a hold of something superior, to trust in a love, a goodness, or a someone. Invocation, as a means to emerge from oneself in order to reach union with, to trust, or take refuge in something or someone superior to ourselves, is increasingly imperative.

At the same time, such invocation is becoming more and more *impossible*. The God to whom such invocation was addressed, the God at the apex of the hierarchy of beings, appears powerless, or to say the least, He does not answer. Man, forced into an individual mold, discovers, with pain, his own solitude. He seeks to emerge from himself in order to avoid sinking, and also to escape from the mass of his equals in order to find himself, but he finds no direction. He emerges from himself only to tumble into the void. His cry for help elicits no response but its own echo or even the mockery of his fellows. To be sure, many of our contemporaries swell the ranks of all sorts of associations and sects that guarantee the genuineness and efficacy of invocation. Yet these remain a minority, and their enthusiasm is mostly short-lived, or else they are bureaucratized and calcified, or eventually fall victim to the temptation of power and cynicism. In short, sincere invocation becomes impossible. "To what God shall we pray with our oblations?" was the meaningful question the Vedas already asked.<sup>3</sup> "It may be that even He knows not," answered the *ṛṣi*<sup>4</sup> long before the Buddha subjected the query itself to the rigors of his critique. In any case, God seems neither to hear nor to answer, as if always supporting the mightiest battalion or the most advanced science. Sacrifice, even in its noblest and deepest meaning of commerce with the divine, has fallen into desuetude even in the majority of traditional religions. Great expectations for the future, with their peak expression in Marxism, have likewise vanished, and the historical (the political, economic, and cultural) horizon is too gloomy or nebulous to inspire the men and women of our time.

In the Vedic world, as well as in the Mediterranean and African latitudes and elsewhere, confidence in reality is extended to the divine as an essential element. Reality includes the divine—ever infinite, mysterious, unreachable, ineffable, but immanent to the world as total reality. Theologies here have their place within a given cosmovision. The divine is "part" of reality, so much so that, in some cases, it is considered the only true reality. Man's destiny will then be to become one with God, or to discover his own identity with *brahman*, or to belong to the true people of God, or to attain the vision of God or to share His life. Here, the divine is the beginning and the end of the cosmic unfolding. There is always a relationship between

<sup>3</sup> Rg Veda 10.121.1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 129.7

creature and creator, between appearance and being, between the many and the one, even between nothing and being. This relationship may be perceived, in one sense, only through reason (*relatio rationis*), but in another sense it is quite constitutive.

The Buddha, in contrast with these theologies, makes a genuine mortal leap: the void does not exist; it simply is not. The void is not mere absence; transcendence—if one shall speak of it—"is" so pure that it *is not*. The non-Buddhist world, in its very infinitude, is somehow spherical and complete, and its cosmology, in its deepest notion, embraces all that can be thought, no matter how open and "unthinkable." Still it remains within the potential of human experience. The Buddha denounces—so to speak—the idea that such infinitude may be "thought" within finite reality. He renounces any statement on the subject not because there may be *something* unsayable or unthinkable but because there is *nothing* to articulate or comprehend. The issue is not that thought may be an obstacle or meditation a failed catapult toward transcendence. The obstacle lies in the fact that man, the catapult, and transcendence form a system. And no matter how "open" a system may be and how infinite it may be considered, the Buddha will not allow himself to be shut up in it. According to Gautama Buddha, neither cosmology, nor theology, let alone anthropology, can encompass the mystery of reality.

The Buddha teaches that one must renounce the thirst (*tṛṣṇā*) for existence and nonexistence alike, that one should not focus on seeking salvation, or *nirvāṇa*. Such thirst includes not only desire but also will: the will to power, the will to being, as well as the will to non-being, the will that constitutes the quintessence of the spirit that prevailed in the West all these past centuries. "Das Urseyn ist Wollen" (Primordial being is will),<sup>5</sup> said Schelling, summarizing the spiritual history of the West. The Buddha's answer consists in not giving an answer since no answer would reply to "nothingness."

Salvation cannot be sought, neither can it be desired. What is sought, what is desired, is transformed by this very fact into an object of volition or desire. And such object cannot be the salvation of man because no object can be. Man is not, ultimately, a consuming animal, and no object will make him fully happy. The problem is the subject, but the subject cannot be objectified without being destroyed. Salvation may only be hoped for, not anticipated in expectation because hope is not expectation. Hope for something is not its volition, nor even its desire. Hope is not desire; it is not the thirst that the Buddha condemns. Hope is not desire because hope is not a projection into the future ("that already shows in hope the certain fruit," as Fray Luis de León put it;<sup>6</sup> fruition is already here, and hence is certain). Hope is a basic attitude of the present, or better still, of temporality—that is, of a presence embracing the "three times" (because it embraces the "three worlds") and their center. Hope is not of the future, but of the invisible.

Hope is not in waiting. Expectation is precisely what the Buddha rejects as egocentric ambition. Hope is what leads the Blessed One to preach his message. Hope can only be a gift, a boon, a present—with no need to necessarily postulate, in thought or imagination, a giver. Hope is grace, perhaps the very grace of existence.

But all of this can only be lived, not written. And I have spoken of an autobiography. . .

<sup>5</sup> Schelling (1943), II.1, p. 338.

<sup>6</sup> The complete stanza says, "del monte en la ladera / por mi mano plantado, tengo un huerto, / que con la primavera, / de bella flor cubierto, / ya muestra en esperanza el fruto cierto." See "La vida retirada," vv. 41–45; Luis de León (1957), p. 743.

### Graphia

The *graphia* of this autobiography is the mere warp of the contemporary situation, without the usual threads used to conceal it with patterns and colors. Let me speak more clearly. Our times are accustomed to sociological studies, psychological reflections, and political treatises. On the interpenetration of diverse cultures we have anthropological essays that generally do not approach such problems with the radicality of an intercultural philosophical mentality. We are accustomed to simple short narratives, draped though they may be in the chintz of statistics, or clad in the livery of socioeconomic theories. Few people dare to delve into the heart of the human condition—partly because any further development of the issue requires much more than mere anecdotes. In this autobiography the only personal narratives will be those related to the personal experience of the reader.

The reader should not therefore expect much about me, but a great deal about us, although this is not often addressed, certainly not reflected in statistics nor in opinion polls. It may even be something that we may not wish to acknowledge, and we may try to numb through work, under the pretext of having no time.

This *graphia*, then, is a piece of writing on the possible fecundation of those three cultures, or groups of cultures, mentioned above. It abstains, however, from reaching any conclusions or syntheses, which are always premature in an autobiography.

In addition to its being a critique of those diminutive forms of orthodoxy that I have elsewhere called "micro-doxies," this study has another ambition: to recover silence—the silence of things, and even the silence of God. Yet it does not even tackle the relationship between silence and word, or being and thought, as I have attempted to do elsewhere. Not everything can be said, because not everything can be thought, and this not only because not everything is thinkable subjectively (on the part of the thinking subject, ourselves), but because not everything is thinkable intrinsically. Being and thought do not coincide, not even at their apex. Reality does not need to be transparent to itself. A monotheism that postulates a self-cognizant Being is a legitimate hypothesis, but secularity has put it under critical scrutiny, and Buddhism does not need it. I will expound on this later. Perhaps we might introduce the subject matter of the book by returning to the relationship between thought and reality. The ultimate characteristic of reality is freedom. Nothing is arbitrary, but everything is free. Therefore, nothing can be thought to its ultimate depths. Everything moves and acts according to its own nature. Nothing occurs by chance, either in the physical, the intellectual, or the spiritual world. That is why you can discover a certain order, but any *raison d'être* does not stand on rationality but on reality. That is why the supreme characteristic is always *freedom*.

In what does this freedom consist? Precisely in the primacy of Being over (and therefore its independence from) thinking. This means that each being *acts*, and basically *is* as it is, and not as thought would force it to be. Each being, in other words, contains a nucleus of freedom that coincides with its *being*.

Freedom is the face of reality. Freedom makes reality not only radically unthinkable but most of all *unthought*. Being is not an object of thought. It is Being that thinks, among its other activities!

This is not the place to go into the question of the compatibility of what we are saying with the idea of substance, or whether we are already defending a Buddhist (and *anātmic*) conception of reality. For the moment I only wish to say that when thought has found the solution to a problem, it is because, in solving it, it has literally dissolved it. If we think God, God as an object of thought is transformed and dissolved. Thought corrodes, although its repression smothers. Thought cannot be repressed. Once a question arises, it cannot be swept

under the carpet. This was not the Buddha's answer. The answer that came to us from the Abrahamic traditions, including the Marxist, consisted in telling us that if there is no such God as the object of thinking, there exists an objective transcendentalism wherein we can place a transcendent God or a transcendent Future. It is here, and only here, in this Abrahamic orbit, that the distinction between believers and nonbelievers has a certain meaning, right up to the absurdity of a situation where not long ago two military superpowers were waging an ideo-theological war that threatened the very life of the planet. In the present situation, the monotheistic split between believers and nonbelievers will grow wider and more essential as there will be no need for political travesties. As a fact, there has been relatively little thinking about the theological roots of the political and cultural situation of the present. Behind all the imperialistic and economic upheavals lies a cultural factor that will "blackmail" the world, forcing it to choose between God and not-God, between believers and unbelievers.

The *graphia* of this book interprets the Buddha's message of the past twenty-five centuries as a possible key to overcoming this dilemma and going beyond these false alternatives. Such victory is not based on the discovery of the critical power of our mind (Vedānta against Karmakāṇḍa or Kant against the "dogmatists"), nor on the discovery of the destructive capacity of reason (as with the philosophy of feeling, and existentialisms of all sorts), nor on any other philosophical system based on reason, but only on our recognition that the pretension to an absolute language is futile, whether such symbol be called God, Reason, Science, Humanity, Truth, or anything else.

To explain reality is to transform it; to think reality is already a manipulation. This is not to deny that some things can be uttered, some thoughts do touch reality, and that there are differences between correct and erroneous thoughts. It is rather the Buddhist intuition of the *via media* between agnosticism and absolutism.

A large part of today's humanity has lived in the past century and still lives under the impression that some inescapable dialectic is at work between the ideologies of the "First" and "Second World." If recently the main contenders were the United States and the Soviet Union, the tension is today shifting, though somewhat timidly, to other areas: in the economic sphere (rich and poor countries, with inevitable conflicts between the first ones when the markets are saturated); in the religious sphere (for example, between the Islamic and the Jewish-Christian worlds), and so forth. There is no wonder, then, that violence and war seem inevitable. There is no other way to resolve conflicts, in fact, when each side believes it possesses the absolute truth. The political consequences are obvious: if we do not outgrow dialectical tensions in order to look deeply into the issues at hand, accepting the contributions of other human cultures, the world will end with the destruction of history itself. The present situation that persists after the last wars confirms these considerations. To think that violence may create order or that justice may justify war means only the repetition of the mortal syndrome *Gott mit uns* (In God we trust, *Dios con nosotros*). We cannot separate politics from the ultimate horizon of our book.

All of this would be the *Sitz im Leben* of this autobiography, intended as a "writing of the life of man." Therefore, this work speaks of God.

Ending this Introduction that summarizes paragraphs of former editions, I can only wish that the reader may acquire the Buddhist wisdom to live a happier and freer life.

## THE PROBLEM

*Ἐάν ὑμῖν εἰπῶ, οὐ μὴ πιστεύσητε*  
*Si vobis dixero non credetis.<sup>1</sup>*

### A Mutual Misunderstanding

An elementary rule of methodology forbids formulating a judgment on anything in categories foreign to it. An anthropological feature, on the other hand, and one just as elementary, teaches us that no boundaries can be set to human thinking. Accordingly, although the issue of contemporary atheism constitutes a cultural circumstance peculiar to the West, an investigation of the religious phenomenon of atheism may yield valuable elements for an elucidation of what is perhaps one of the most important problems of our time.

Of course, it would be as wrong to label "atheistic" those conceptions of the world that do not present a concept of God after the manner of the believing West as to assert that atheism has been hitherto unknown in the history of mankind. At bottom, both opinions seem to spring from the aforementioned prejudice of judging a phenomenon through categories foreign to it. As a fact, the unity of human nature must include the possibility of transforming the intellectual coordinates in order to understand a religious and cultural phenomenon distinct from one's own.

Such effort to grasp another cultural and religious world from within is indeed rather difficult because it demands a somewhat integral asceticism, in a rather new form because of the sociological conditions it implies. The concrete problem we seek to address is whether it is possible to build a religious and cultural (or whatever you may want to call it) bridge with an arch twenty-five centuries high and a span of thousands of miles—a bridge between the contemporary religious concern with atheism and the message of the Buddha proclaiming a religion that apparently has no room for God.

Once the problem has been sketched out, I shall limit myself to a presentation of certain basic texts that have won Buddhism its reputation as atheistic. Then, in chapter 3, I shall proceed with a synthetic interpretation of these texts in the light of Buddhist principles and keeping in mind the categories of our contemporary thought.

After all, it is common knowledge that there is no such thing as a "Buddhism" in the singular, that so-called primitive Buddhism remains problematic, and that the original teaching of the Buddha is far from having been authenticated.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there has never been unanimity, neither in antiquity nor in the present state of Buddhist studies, nor in the various religious schools that claim to be following the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> All this gives us one more

<sup>1</sup> "Though I tell you, you will not believe" (Lk 22:67). See also Jn 3:12; Wis 9:16.

<sup>2</sup> See Schrader (1902), the monumental work of Mus (1935), the writings of Schayer (1935; 1937), and more recently, the first part of the book by Conze (1962).

<sup>3</sup> See the complex critical study of the theories of G. Oldenberg, T. W. Rhys Davids, and others, together with an example of stratification in various texts of the classic collections themselves, in Pande (1957).

example of the imprecision, not to say arbitrariness, of the concept of religion intended as a compact body of orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to make it clear from the beginning, then, that I do not claim all the texts I shall be citing to have been pronounced directly by the mouth of the Awakened. Some of them, in fact, come from a much later period than primitive Buddhist tradition, but I think that in one way or another they all represent the authentic Buddhist spirit. It is in fact quite exceptional that, in spite of the huge variety of sects and opinions within Buddhism, and despite the fact that "the age of Buddhist revelation has never been closed,"<sup>5</sup> the basic intuitions of Buddhism have been completely preserved throughout the twenty-five centuries of its history. "Whatever the blessed Buddha has said, has been well said,"<sup>6</sup> as the Emperor Asoka commanded it to be sculpted in stone. "Whatever has been said well has been said by the Buddha,"<sup>7</sup> echoed the orthodox tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Be that as it may, since our intent is not primarily historical, it cannot be denied that there is a Buddhist fact, together with an impalpable something that could be called a Buddhist spirit.<sup>9</sup> It is to this fact and to this spirit that we shall be referring in our study, since our work is not concerned merely with the archaeology of philosophy but with a historical and religious reality that, being rooted in the past, retains its full strength in the present.

Let us emphasize yet again that the perspective of this undertaking is not historical but philosophical. Were we to approach the Buddhist fact from a historical and chronological angle, we would have to offer detailed and comprehensive reference to many of the ideas expressed here. The amount of notes in this essay is the necessary tribute to factuality. We do believe, however, that although historical study is indispensable, it does not preclude an effort toward a form of philosophical understanding that avoids becoming entangled in historicism without being antihistorical.

The variety of opinions should not make us forget "something" beyond the notional world, something that a human tradition can preserve. For example, how could we settle for a mere phenomenology of opinions concerning the Christ, with a range of judgments going from imposture to the status of the only-begotten of God or to that of a mere Docetist apparition?

As we undertake such an endeavor, bridging East and West, while striving to remain faithful to both Buddhism and Christianity, we do not feel it is a rhetorical exaggeration to consider their mutual misunderstanding as a crime of *lèse humanité*. It is an ongoing absurdity, not to say scandal<sup>10</sup> (at least in our planetary age), that two spiritual facts of the scope of

<sup>4</sup> See W. C. Smith (1962), chap. 2, especially for his analysis of the arbitrary use of the word "religion."

<sup>5</sup> See Lamotte (1958), p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Bloch (1950), p. 154.

<sup>7</sup> See the corresponding notes in Lamotte (1958).

<sup>8</sup> See exactly the same attitude, even the same words, concerning Christ and the Christians in Christian patristic literature, e.g., Justin, *Apologiae* II.13 (PG 6.465): *οἷσα οὖν παρὰ πᾶσι καλῶς εἶρηται ἐμῶν τῶν χριστιανῶν ἐστίν* [Any truth, no matter who utters it, belongs to us Christians]. The attitude of Christianity toward the assimilation of other doctrines is still based on this proposition. See also 1 Cor 3:22.

<sup>9</sup> Lamotte also emphasizes such unity.

<sup>10</sup> Lubac (1950/1), p. 8, has written that Buddhism could be called *"sans doute le plus grand fait spirituel de l'Histoire"* [with no doubt the most important spiritual fact in all history], whereas Guardini (1937), p. 360, could write, "vielleicht wird der Letzter sein, mit dem das Christentum sich auseinanderzusetzen hat" [Perhaps Buddha will be the last religious genius to be explained by Christianity], immediately adding that "Was er christlich bedeutet, hat noch keiner gesagt" [as yet no one has

Christianity and Buddhism, which have coexisted for some twenty centuries and together comprise about half of mankind, can ignore one another, and that when they do meet they hardly have the rudiments of a basic common language for dialogue, and worse still, that the opinion each has formed of the other generally represents only the grossest approximation. This situation is not only of the past<sup>11</sup> but of the present.<sup>12</sup>

Fortunately, in the past decades the situation has been rapidly improving. Books abound, reviews are issued,<sup>13</sup> and the West already counts 1 million Buddhists.

Still, in general, the current notion of Buddhism in the West is that of an atheistic, nihilistic, negative "religion," softened by a polytheistic, rather superstitious or magical, popular faith. Some see it as a more or less profound, universalistic form of "mysticism," whereas others consider it a simple "philosophy," giving to the word the restricted sense it has taken in recent centuries.

Since "Eastern spirituality" has become fashionable, Buddhism—Zen in particular—appears as a technique or method for attaining personal integration or psychological peace. Thus, the Buddha comes to be considered as a "saint" rather than as the bearer of sacred charisma and as the founder of a religious movement.<sup>14</sup> On the Buddhist side, misunderstanding is just as great. For example, Christ has been seen as the victim of a sadistic God,<sup>15</sup> and Christianity as a set of moral rules rather than a religion. The misunderstanding abides, although fortunately some positive signs tell us that it may be overcome. The reasons for such misunderstanding are easy to list. In the first place, until recently there were no adequate occasions to meet, to know, and to value the other. Second, when an opportunity did finally present itself, it was corrupted by the unequal form of the encounter, as well as by many other factors—conquest or resistance, conversion or counterattack, political questions or economic contingencies, and so on. Third, even a minimal philosophical and theological basis for a dialogue was lacking. Nonreligious dialogue will never get to the heart of the question, and yet there cannot be religious communication until there is true sacral communion.<sup>16</sup>

Indifference and a superiority complex have, of course, played a role on the Buddhist side. On the Christian side, an exclusivistic, not to say disdainful, interpretation has been such that, where positive values could not be denied, they were attributed to natural human goodness, or to a theory of plagiarism, or to primitive Christian influences. We may recall, for example, the long-held Western belief that the Buddha came after Christ, because undeniable

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said (what the Buddha) means in Christian terms). Such a statement is still bewildering if we consider the immense bibliography on the subject.

<sup>11</sup> See Lubac (1952) for numerous examples of the quid pro quo to which I allude.

<sup>12</sup> Couturier (1963), p. 6, even tried to single out 1925 as the dividing line between missiological essays of negative and positive orientation, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Raguin (1973); Drummond (1974); Nakamura (1975); Chwen Jihuan Lee and Thomas Hand (1990); Abe (1985); etc. For the journals: *Japanese Religions*, Kyoto; *Philosophy East and West*, Honolulu (Hawaii); *Paramita*, Rome; *The Eastern Buddhist*, Kyoto; *Revista de estudio Budistas*, México, Buenos Aires. There is a Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies that publishes a quarterly newsletter and also a *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue Bulletin* published by Aide Inter-Monastères (AIM) and by the North American Board for East-West Dialogue (NABEWD).

<sup>14</sup> I do not deny the superficiality of many of these "Eastern" spiritual movements of the West, but this does not justify the equally superficial criticism of them by the noted theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1977), pp. 260–68.

<sup>15</sup> See Suzuki (1957), p. 136, quoted further on.

<sup>16</sup> See R. Panikkar (1988/9); Puthanangady (1988).



similarities were otherwise inexplicable.<sup>17</sup> To be sure, the same error has been committed on the other side.<sup>18</sup>

This study aspires to correct the misunderstanding—not by directly analyzing it but by highlighting (without slipping into an amorphous syncretism) the possibility of fecundating a contemporary Western issue with the most ancient Buddhist tradition.<sup>19</sup> What we seek to achieve is basically a positive cross-fertilization of both traditions. It goes without saying, of course, that a similar fecundation in the Buddhist context would need a different language. This is already taking place.<sup>20</sup>

### The Different Opinions

An analysis of the judgment that Western scholars have delivered on Buddhism presents an almost dizzying diversity of opinion on most basic points.<sup>21</sup> Regarding the theme of this study, Buddhism has been labeled pantheistic,<sup>22</sup> polytheistic,<sup>23</sup> theistic,<sup>24</sup> negative,<sup>25</sup> and atheistic.<sup>26</sup> Again, whereas some seek to defend it as pure agnosticism,<sup>27</sup> others regard it as simple pragmatism that refuses to take a position on problems of a purely theoretical nature.<sup>28</sup> Still others praise or condemn it, according to preference, as the most radical and consistent form of nihilism.<sup>29</sup> Finally, there are even authors who regard the Buddha as a

<sup>17</sup> See Cuttat (1964), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Winternitz (1927–1933), p. 415, and many of the works quoted there, such as Garbe (1912).

<sup>19</sup> See Cuttat's (1965) incisive, profound conclusion in his commentary on the eminent work of Romano Guardini: "die Echtheit und Tiefe der Begegnung der christlichen Innerlichkeit [wird] mit der Buddhistischen vom Grad unseres eigenen Eintretens in die Existentialität Christi bestimmt" [the authenticity and depth of the encounter of Christian interiority and Buddhist interiority are determined by the degree of our own insertion into the existentiality of Christ].

<sup>20</sup> The so-called school of Kyoto, for example, could be interpreted as a "discovery" of the West by the East, similar to what once happened in the opposite direction. See, among works translated into English, Takeuchi 1983; Tanabe 1986; Nishitani 1982; Nishida 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Consider, for example, the diversity of opinions on as important a point as *dharma*. While for some (O. Rosenberg, Stcherbatsky, etc.) the theory of *dharma* is central to Buddhism, for others (e.g., Keith, Schayer) it is almost a foreign body. See Glasenapp (1962/2), pp. 111–24.

<sup>22</sup> See Suzuki (1947), p. 64, for his claim to the contrary.

<sup>23</sup> See many of the presentations of Mahāyāna Buddhism, e.g., Bhattacharyya (1958), pp. 518–37.

<sup>24</sup> See Regamey (1951), pp. 261–64.

<sup>25</sup> This is the most widespread idea in certain circles. It corresponds to the traditional division of Indian wisdom into *astika* and *nāstika*, concepts referring respectively to the acceptance or rejection of the Vedas, but that almost immediately came to express belief in or rejection of transcendence. See T. R. V. Murli (1955), pp. 3–103.

<sup>26</sup> "Buddhism is atheistic—there is no doubt about it," states Takakusu (1956), p. 45. See also: "Original Buddhism is therefore atheistic in a double sense—in the Indian sense of denying the authority of the Vedas and in the Western sense of refusing to discuss the necessity and nature of God" (H. Bhattacharyya [1938], p. 109). See also the important monograph by Glasenapp (1954), where he defends the thesis of Buddhism as an atheistic religion.

<sup>27</sup> See Keith (1923), p. 63. This position would also seem to be that of La Vallée Poussin, who is criticized in Stcherbatsky (1968; p. 21 of the 1965 edition).

<sup>28</sup> C. A. F. Rhys Davids could be quoted here as an exponent of this interpretation, with her numerous works and her translations of Buddhist materials.

<sup>29</sup> See Fatone (1941), who delineates various aspects of the question; and E. J. Thomas (1963), p. 128, who questions this interpretation, which he attributes to Oldenberg, among others. For his

mythical personage<sup>30</sup> and Buddhism as a mythology,<sup>31</sup> largely of a magical character.<sup>32</sup> Today it is increasingly acknowledged that Buddhism is neither theistic nor atheistic,<sup>33</sup> but the paradox of an atheistic religion still remains puzzling for a large amount of humankind.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, some deny it any religious character whatsoever,<sup>35</sup> while others consider it as the purest of religions.<sup>36</sup>

It can scarcely be denied that the phenomenon of Buddhism is sufficiently extensive and complex for all these opinions to be upheld with some *de facto* pertinence.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, to date, precious little agreement has come about in the interpretation of Buddhism.<sup>38</sup> Historical monographs fail to solve the problem; they just circumscribe in time and space the heterogeneity of the Buddhist fact. And yet today we begin to see a convergence precisely in the area of philosophical interpretation.

In an attempt to summarize the various opinions concerning the Buddha's faith we may proceed as follows.

### *Cynicism*

According to this first interpretation, the Buddha would have been an authentic cynic, concealing the ultimate answer from the men of his time, who sought, as in all ages, a solution to the fundamental problem of man.

Within this first interpretation there is a further possible distinction between a cynicism of simulation and dissimulation.<sup>39</sup> According to the former, the Buddha himself did not know which side to take: he had no precise notion when it came to ultimate issues. Silence<sup>40</sup> and

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part, Lubac (1952), pp. 161 and 265, denies that Buddhism is a *nihilisme athée* (atheistic nihilism) or a *religion du néant* (religion of nothingness).

<sup>30</sup> See Coomaraswamy (1943), pp. 79–80, who also notes that, for the same reason, the appellation "Tathāgata" is applicable to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha.

<sup>31</sup> See Coomaraswamy (1935).

<sup>32</sup> See Mus (1935), vol. 1. For Tantric Buddhism, see S. B. Dasgupta (1957).

<sup>33</sup> "There is no reference to God; but neither do the four Holy Truths contain any hint—and this should be noted — of atheism," says Graham (1964), p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> "Religious atheism" is how Buddhism is defined by Leeuw (1956), p. 194. The same idea is upheld by W. C. Smith (1966), p. 7: "If this was atheism, it was a religious atheism."

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Schmidt (1930), p. 4, in relation to his interpretation of the essence of religion as a personal "*religatio*," binding man to a superhuman power.

<sup>36</sup> As we know, Schopenhauer, like Kant, considered Buddhism as unambiguously atheistic, interpreting theism as a species of the genus "religion," in which atheism also had its place. See the relative citations in Glaserapp (1954), p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Relying on the classification proposed by Jacques Maritain (1949), who differentiates between a "practical," an "absolute," and a "pseudo-atheism." Fernando (1965), pp. 83–84, includes Buddhism in the last category, as a pseudo-atheism of a conceptual order. In other words, Buddhism would acknowledge God practically, while denying Him conceptually.

<sup>38</sup> "Although a hundred years have elapsed since the scientific study of Buddhism was initiated in Europe, we are nevertheless still in the dark about the fundamental teachings of this religion and its philosophy," wrote Stcherbatsky (1968), p. 1; T. R. V. Murti (1955), p. vii, comments that this observation "remains no less true today."

<sup>39</sup> See the Latin saying, *Quae non sunt, simulo: quae sunt, dissimulo* [I feign what is not; whatever is, I feign that it is not].

<sup>40</sup> We know of a similar attitude on the part of the Rabbi of Nazareth, who never gave a direct answer to any "philosophical" or theoretical question.

simulation proved to be his only dignified way out.<sup>41</sup> In other words, this theory claimed that the Buddha was an impostor who simply took advantage of the good faith of others. Today no one seems capable of upholding such a view.

The second interpretation seeks at least to save appearances by claiming that the Buddha must certainly have been personally convinced of one solution or another (generally thought to be the nihilistic alternative) but that he felt obliged to dissimulate his conviction for fear of limiting too severely the number of his followers.<sup>42</sup> Here, too, the Buddha is represented as a charlatan of more or less good intentions. Obviously, our modern-day age cannot accept such a thesis, so totally lacking in any textual basis and proceeding from a simple a priori bias against religion in general or Buddhism in particular.

Not only is there not the slightest evidence for doubting the Buddha's radical genuineness and honesty, but there is no reason for attributing to him such intentions. Someone like the Buddha, had he wished to deceive men, could surely have found some more expeditious means of doing so than to preach a doctrine that excludes the slightest concession to the human instinct of self-assertion. Furthermore, the Buddha explicitly denies that he has followed the exoteric practice of the "master's closed hand" with his disciples<sup>43</sup>—that is, concealing from them anything necessary for their salvation.<sup>44</sup> The Buddha shared all that he had to share.<sup>45</sup>

### *Nihilism*

According to a second interpretation, the Buddha was an out-and-out atheist. He preached absolute nihilism. *Nirvāṇa* would be total annihilation, and in the "beyond" there would be neither a God nor anything else. The Buddha refused to speak of God because he did not believe in God. His denial was, moreover, so radical that he did not acknowledge the issue, not even to deny God's existence. In this conception, Buddhism would be the true and authentic atheism.<sup>46</sup>

It would be difficult to find a Buddhist scholar today who supports the thesis of nihilism, propounded principally by French orientalist in the middle of the nineteenth century<sup>47</sup> and in varying degrees of subtlety.<sup>48</sup> Here again, it would be easy to show that the texts are being read through the lenses of a "metaphysical" system whose values are foreign to the spirit and intentions of Buddhism.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See Washburn Hopkins (1895), pp. 321–22.

<sup>42</sup> See Welbon (1965), p. 314, who explains the possible genesis of such an attitude.

<sup>43</sup> *Ācāryamuttāhi* or *ācāryaniṣṭi* was an ancient custom (of which traces still remain), according to which, shortly before his death, a father would confide to his son—or a guru to his favorite disciple—the authentic, most important message. See *DN* II.100.

<sup>44</sup> See *Mhparinibb* VI.17.

<sup>45</sup> Christ manifests a similar attitude when he says that he has made known to his followers everything he had heard from his Father (Jn 15:15); see also Jn 16:25; 18:20. See also in Chinese tradition: "The master said, 'Friends, I know you suspect I may have held back something. There is absolutely nothing I have concealed from you. I have no secrets for you, friends, nothing I did not share. Otherwise my name would not be Ch'iu [Confucius]'" *Analecta* VII.17.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Rosenberg (1924), pp. 155–56 and his reference to Vasubandhu's AbhK and Chinese commentaries. It is difficult to understand the reference to the abhidharmic school, for it appears rather to favor the position of an epistemological realism. See T. R. V. Murti (1944), pp. 41–44.

<sup>47</sup> Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire (1875), pp. 321–24, while seeking to safeguard his own interpretation, maintains that for Buddhists the ultimate end of Buddhism is total nihilism.

<sup>48</sup> See the classic work by Burnouf (1875), and the synthesis of his position in Welbon (1966), pp. 307ff.

<sup>49</sup> See the various texts presented in the second part of this book.

Where a negative and contingent notion of existence is being held (whether justified or not is not the question here), its denial, even its annihilation, will scarcely be the equivalent of what today we call nihilism, or even atheism. If we are to judge fairly, we should not be content with translating terminology, but must try to interpret intuitions.

There is also the familiar thesis that Buddhist atheism (or, better, nihilism) was a later "aberration." According to this conception, primitive, authentic Buddhism was not nihilistic; later Buddhism, by contrast, especially that of the philosophers, represents the secondary construction of a radical nihilism.<sup>50</sup>

### *Agnosticism*

The only adequate reason found by some authors for the Buddhist refusal to take a position concerning ultimate questions consists in attributing to the Buddha a personal agnosticism coupled with a prudent reserve.<sup>51</sup> According to this view, the Buddha had come to the realization that nothing can be known with certainty and that the human mind lacks the capacity for knowing truth. Making virtue out of necessity, he adopted his characteristic attitude of refusing to allow himself to be caught in metaphysical or philosophical arguments.<sup>52</sup>

The celebrated parable in the Pāli canon concerning leaves (so few can be held in the hand compared to those in the wood) has been, since ancient times, the orthodox rejoinder to the theory of the Buddha's agnosticism:

Once the Buddha was abiding in the Simsapā wood, in the region of Kosambī. Taking some simsapā leaves in his hand, he put this question to his disciples: "Where, think ye, are there surely more leaves, here in my hand, or on all of the trees of the wood?"

But his disciples replied: "Few are the leaves in thy hand, whilst in the forest there are many more."

But he said to them: "Thus it is with my teaching: what I know, but have not taught ye, is altogether more than what I have taught ye. But why have I not taught ye these things? Because they are of no utility for the end."<sup>53</sup>

One need not, to be sure, adopt the opposite position and hold that the Buddha was omniscient, that he knew everything, but that he did not wish to reveal it to his disciples. Besides postulating an act of blind faith in the Buddha, this interpretation would contradict the explicit assertion on his part that he did not follow the custom of the "closed hand."<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, agnosticism is quite a straightforward doctrine, and it would have cost the Buddha nothing at all to declare that he did not know, or that human beings could not solve, the ultimate mysteries of existence. Yet the Buddha never claimed to be an agnostic.

<sup>50</sup> This is the thesis popularized by the numerous works and translations of C. A. F. Rhys Davids, especially after the death of her husband. See the texts in T. R. V. Murti (1955), pp. 20ff. (including a scathing critique), and in Welbon (1966), p. 317.

<sup>51</sup> See Monier-Williams (1964), p. 119; Keith (1923), p. 45ff.; La Vallée Poussin, *passim*.

<sup>52</sup> Among the defenders of this position, see Jung (1972), p. 320, who on the question of the nature of karma says, "Buddha hat es offen gelassen, und ich möchte annehmen, er habe es nicht mit Sicherheit gewusst" [Buddha has left the question open, and personally I think he did not know it with certainty].

<sup>53</sup> He had taught them the Four Noble Truths; see SN V.437 (Saccasamyutta, 31). Note the parallelism with Christ (Jn 16:12), although the motivation is quite different: the disciples cannot bear other truths for the time being, whereas for the Buddha nothing is lacking for attaining the ultimate goal of life.

<sup>54</sup> See n. 26, above.

On the contrary, his behavior was entirely that of the "Enlightened One," indeed, of the one who knows, who has seen, who has "realized." The Buddha never entertained the least doubt as to his own position and solution. The Buddha knows. He knows, and makes manifest, the road of salvation. Nothing could be further removed from the attitude of an agnostic.

### *Pragmatism*

Pragmatism may not be the best term for the fourth interpretation. Today the word implies a certain utilitarianism that would have been foreign to the Buddha's mentality. But since the expression has been used,<sup>55</sup> we shall also use it to highlight an eminently practical attitude that could also be called existential. According to this view, the Buddha said nothing of God or the afterlife because he regarded the question as irrelevant or even an obstacle on the path to Man's ultimate end. Here the Buddha would be the prototype of the religious prophet who comes not to preach a doctrine or teach a theory, but to point out a path and fulfill a mission.<sup>56</sup> Here, Buddhist "annihilation" would be but the annihilation of hatred, lust, sloth, and so forth.<sup>57</sup>

This position has also been termed "positivistic,"<sup>58</sup> but such a word has specific connotations that would be inapplicable to the case of the Buddha. What is really meant by the expression in this context is a kind of prudent abstentionism, whose aim is to avoid complicating unnecessarily the personal question of salvation.

The example of the man wounded by an arrow, who pauses to engage in speculation upon the event rather than remove it, is typical of this position.<sup>59</sup> And, indeed, whenever the Buddha refuses a reply—and yet rejects a negative interpretation of his refusal—the reason that he invariably gives is that a theoretical response provides no orientation<sup>60</sup> nor advances the realization of the ideal:

Wrongly, basely, falsely, and without foundation do certain ascetics and brahmins accuse me, saying that Gautama the ascetic is a nihilist, and that he preaches annihilation, destruction, and nonexistence. Such I am not, such I do not assert. Today, monks, as before, I proclaim one thing alone: suffering and suffering's extinction. . . .<sup>61</sup>

This "pragmatism" has also been interpreted as a kind of silence of etiquette. In other words, the silence of the Buddha would be nothing else but an elegant, traditional way of saying that the question is not well formulated.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Hiriyanā (1956), pp. 137ff. See also an intelligent description of pragmatism in Fontinell (1986), although lacking reference to Buddhism.

<sup>56</sup> Compare another example: Christ "n'a pas fait de théorie sur les origines du mal, il n'a fourni aucune explication sur le fait du péché originel et sur les circonstances de son apparition, mais il s'est fait péché pour nous" [constructed no theory on the origins of evil or furnished any explanation on the fact of original sin and on the circumstances of its appearance, but became sin for us] (2 Cor 5:21; Roustang [1963], p. 52).

<sup>57</sup> This would be the position of, for example, T. W. Rhys Davids: see Welbon (1966), p. 312.

<sup>58</sup> For example, by Glasenapp.

<sup>59</sup> See MN I.429ff. (Cūḷa Māluṅkya Sutta 63).

<sup>60</sup> In fact, the Buddha rejected nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) more often than so-called eternalism (*śāśvataavāda*).

<sup>61</sup> In Fatone (1941), p. 30, who quotes MN I.139. See further on.

<sup>62</sup> Vasubandhu (Abhk V.22) reports that it was a rule of dialectics at the time of the Buddha

The implied narrative affirms a kind of superiority on the part of the "Compassionate One" who does not deign to meddle with questions weighing upon most mortals.

To be sure, such an attitude is not altogether incompatible with the spirit of Buddhism; and of course, any practical attitude, whether we like it or not, ultimately depends on a theoretical framework. The very fact of considering irrelevant the question of God implies, for example, a specific conception of the Godhead, and certainly not one in which God would assume a central position even if only to deny it. Again, to assert that the main thing is salvation, without any concern for a speculative examination of what is meant by salvation, still implies a specific conception both of salvation and of the human cognitive faculties. Therefore, though recognizing a "pragmatic" attitude in Buddhism is partly correct, in the final analysis this position cannot be maintained, resting as it does on an implicit speculative basis.<sup>63</sup>

### *Problematicism*

A more subtle and more profound variant of the foregoing is the current of thought that interprets the silence of the Buddha concerning basic philosophical questions as a position of radical problematicism. If a question is ill posed, if the premises from which it arises cannot be accepted, then any attempt to give a direct answer will amount to error. In the theory of problematicism it is for this reason, and not simply out of etiquette, that the Buddha refused to give an answer since no answer, whether positive or negative, could satisfy him.<sup>64</sup>

This is a perfectly plausible explanation, but the Buddha would have been able to reformulate the question correctly. Problematicism goes a step further and suggests a more intimate relationship between query and response. The issue lies no longer, we hear, in denying an answer to a badly formulated question. We should rather consider that formulating any question is not a neutral endeavor. Consider Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" applied to the distortion introduced by a question into the problem it addresses. Anyone who formulates a question not only distorts the question but also renders impossible any answer that does not accept the implied criteria of the question itself. In other words, the question is unanswerable for the very fact that any intellectual inquiry violates the virginity of something which, when transformed into a question, destroys the only context in which a reply could be appropriate. Allegedly, the Buddha's very intelligence would condemn him to silence: "If I declare that there is *attan*, it will be thought of as eternal; if I declare that there is not *attan*, it will be imagined to utterly perish at death."<sup>65</sup>

I shall make no attempt to conceal my sympathy for this type of solution. But I cannot help observing that, on the one hand, it would be something of a philosophical anachronism to interpret a twenty-five-century-old problem with a kind of philosophical understanding based on a form of consciousness altogether peculiar to recent generations.

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to answer by silence those questions that were wrongly formulated, e.g., all questions that regarded the properties of a nonexistent thing. Professor Oldenberg rightly remarks on another occasion in his book *Upanishaden*, "Die eigenste Sprache dieser Mystik, wie aller Mystik, ist Schweigen" [The most appropriate language of this mysticism, as of all mysticisms, is silence] (Stcherbatsky [1968], p. 22). See also Pande (1957), p. 506, who maintains that a silence of pure etiquette is out of the question.

<sup>63</sup> See Organ (1954), pp. 125–40. If this position were correct, Organ would be right in charging the Buddha with a very weak philosophical position since the Tathāgata would be ignoring both the natural human tendency to philosophize, and the fact that any attitude, however pragmatic and anti-intellectual, always involves an implicit philosophy.

<sup>64</sup> I might cite La Vallée Poussin and Conze as examples of this interpretation.

<sup>65</sup> SN IV.398. See also the text cited above.

The problematicistic solution appears weak on a second account also. If this had really been the Buddha's solution, it is not clear why he should not have said so. Let us not overlook the fact that, unlike so many of our own contemporaries, the Buddha did not say that silence was the proper answer.<sup>66</sup> He simply kept silent.

To be sure, it could be said that the Buddha envisaged the possibility of this solution, but that, for want of philosophical categories necessary to express it, he preferred to keep silent. It has even been said that he of course knew the solution, but because his contemporaries were not prepared to hear it, his only recourse was to be silent.

I shall not, then, enter upon a discussion either on the Buddha's omniscience or on the possibility that he was perhaps several centuries ahead of human collective awareness. However, these two theological and religious explanations seem acceptable, once those of a strictly philosophical order have been exhausted.<sup>67</sup>

An explanation by way of problematicism, then, touches a most important point in Buddhist attitudes, and its pursuit could shed light on the parallel question in our own contemporary speculation. But it does not seem to me to fully correspond either to the Buddha's deepest intuition, which was religious and not epistemological, or to his simple and prophetic attitude, which is basically incompatible with any merely intellectual understanding.

### *Dialectics*

According to the most enthusiastic proponents of the dialectical interpretation, the honor of having been the first dialectician falls to the Buddha.<sup>68</sup> Other interpreters prefer to define his attitude as critical.<sup>69</sup> The Enlightened One refused to give an intellectual answer to ultimate issues precisely because they transcend the sphere of intellection and thought, and can be grasped and experienced only through what we today would define as a "quantum leap."<sup>70</sup> To attain liberation, all antinomies must be overcome.<sup>71</sup>

This solution, venerably rooted in Buddhist tradition, nurturing as it does the whole Mādhyamika, touches on a central point in the order of knowledge the Buddha offers—namely, the transcendence of reality with respect to both the phenomenological and the conceptual orders.<sup>72</sup> If God can be imprisoned in the concept of God, if the afterlife can be thought of as an improved version of this one, or if the purely conceptual order cannot be

<sup>66</sup> See the well-known assertions of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Simone Weil, and others.

<sup>67</sup> This seems to be the position of Watsuji (1927), pp. 133–34 (Japanese edition) when he writes, "That the metaphysical questions of this kind were not answered by the Buddha does not immediately mean that the Buddha denied the validity of philosophical or systematic thinking. On the contrary, there can easily be defended a case in which such an attitude [silence] constitutes the essential characteristic of a philosophy" (quoted by Nagao (1955), pp. 137–51).

<sup>68</sup> See T. R. V. Murti (1955), pp. 47–48.

<sup>69</sup> The important work of two Japanese philosophers, Watsuji and Ui, can be applied here. A summary of their thought is to be found in Takeuchi (1965).

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, Radhakrishnan (1929), pp. 682–83.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, a characteristic passage from the BG (VII.28) on liberation from the deceitful polarity of opposites. A whole system could be constructed on dialectics: (1) the acknowledgment of the reality of the negative (error, suffering, etc.), (2) the discovery of the unilateral character of the positive (truth, pleasure, etc.), (3) a synthesis of both viewpoints, and (4) a genuine unity of the two that would transcend both.

<sup>72</sup> It is a commonplace that Theravāda is much further removed from this solution than is Mahāyāna.

overcome—then obviously there is neither God, nor an afterlife, nor reality. The Buddha cannot give an answer within the rational categories of any kind of question.

Now, in the first place, why call this position dialectical? If enlightenment could be reached in virtue of a dialectical victory, the conceptual structure would have the very causal importance and function that we were supposed to transcend. In the second place, it would seem rather presumptuous, and ultimately improbable, to suppose that none of those approaching the Buddha to seek his counsel appreciated such a distinction—that all of them remained attached to a rationalistic conception of reality. It is true, of course, that any formulation and any question must have enough intellectual content to be intelligible. Yet seekers who try to formulate a vital, existential question are not likely to be looking only for a sort of satisfaction to their intellectual curiosity. The presumption later developed by the Mādhyamika—that no philosophical system is anything more than a rational, not to say rationalistic set of philosophical formulations—seems to me not only gratuitous and rather condescending, but also to fail to do justice to the attitudes of a great number of philosophical systems of East and West alike.<sup>73</sup>

If the Buddha kept silence, the dialectical interpretation does not seem particularly satisfactory, since we do not think it admissible that the Buddha was the only one, or the first, to have discovered that reality transcends concepts and thought.<sup>74</sup> Many others, before and after him, have seen and maintained this, without necessarily adopting Gautama's attitude.

Dialectics does indeed take into account a remarkable extent of the Buddha's attitude, and we have the best evidence for this in later Buddhist tradition, which developed it in a particular way, but it does not seem to represent the Tathāgata's<sup>75</sup> fundamental intuition. It is too technically philosophical and contrary to the spirit of the great Compassionate One who was unwilling to write a single line. Let us keep in mind that this renunciation of writing is also a renunciation of fixing principles or immutable laws valid for all times and intelligible to all readers. Here the Buddha reminds us not only of Pythagoras and Socrates, but of Jesus himself.<sup>76</sup>

### *Apophaticism*

Here I could have used the term "mysticism," but I have been dissuaded by its numerous and varied connotations.<sup>77</sup>

First of all, we cannot seriously consider the silence of the Buddha as proceeding from an ignoble simulation, any more than from dishonest dissimulation: the motives are much deeper. Second, surely, the reason for his silence cannot be reduced to a psychological inability to speak of reality or to give true answers to fundamental human questions. Nor can the depth of the Buddha's intuition be satisfactorily explained by interpreting his silence as an

<sup>73</sup> See Panikkar (1971/XII), pp. 99–130, where this "pretension" of the Mādhyamika comes under scrutiny and criticism.

<sup>74</sup> "It seems to us, however, that Buddha's *Madhyamā Pratipad* sought to resolve the opposition of being and non-being, not by synthesising the two categories, but by transcending them both" (Pande [1957], pp. 420–21).

<sup>75</sup> An antonomastic title of the Buddha signifying "one who has attained to the truth," who has finally "realized" it.

<sup>76</sup> That the "letter killeth" (see 2 Cor 3:6; Rom 2:29; 7:6) is so much the case that Divine Providence has taken great care that the Christian Scriptures be preserved only in translation.

<sup>77</sup> See the interpretation suggested by Takeuchi (1965), p. 18, in reference to Beck's book. Nagao (1955) also seems to move in this direction.



epistemological need—that is, related to the incapacity of the human mind to comprehend the ultimate mystery of reality. This is certainly true, but it does not justify his silent message.<sup>78</sup> Still less is the Buddha's silence explained by a sort of anti-intellectual, or perhaps merely supra-intellectual, attitude, as if reality could be comprehensible through a faculty (since this is what we should have to call it) transcending the capacity of a normal human intellect. There is nothing in the Buddha (indeed, if anything, the contrary is true) that might cause him to be suspected of some sort of predilection for "supernatural," extraordinary phenomena. The ultimate reason for the Buddha's silence seems rooted neither in the inherent limitation of each human subject, nor in the imperfection of our cognition, nor yet in the mysterious, hidden nature of reality.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, it seems to me that the ultimate reason for the silence of the Buddha resides precisely in the fact that this ultimate reality is not. Let me explain.<sup>80</sup> The term "apophatic" is usually used in reference to epistemological apophaticism, suggesting that the ultimate reality is ineffable (although it may be considered as intelligible, even supremely intelligible, *in se*) since no human intelligence is able to grasp it. Now, whereas apophaticism tells us of ineffability for us, *quoad nos*, Buddhist apophaticism seeks to transport this ineffability into the heart of ultimate reality itself, asserting that this reality—inasmuch as its *logos*, its expression and communication, no longer pertains to the order of ultimate reality but to the order of its manifestation, not merely in our regard, for us, but as such, *quoad se*. Thus, Buddhist apophaticism is both ontic and ontological.<sup>81</sup> Ultimate reality is so supremely ineffable and transcendent that, strictly speaking, Buddhism will deny it the character of Being. Being is what is, but what is, by the very fact of its existence, is in some measure thinkable and communicable; it belongs to the order of manifestation, of being, and cannot therefore be considered as ultimate reality itself.

When the Buddha refuses to answer, it is not for any subjective reason (neither his own nor that of the hearer, nor of human nature) but in virtue of an exigency of reality itself: his is not a methodological or a pedagogical silence, but an ontic and ontological silence.<sup>82</sup> His silence concerns not only the answer but the question itself. He is not only silent, he reduces to silence.

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<sup>78</sup> "Man kennt Buddha nicht solange man ihn nach dem beurteilt, was er geredet hat" [One does not know the Buddha as long as one judges him by what he has uttered], and the author goes on to speak of the *Macht des Schweigens* [the power of silence], stating that "die Bedeutung dieses Schweigens richtig zu erfassen, ist für das ganze Verständnis des Buddhismus von grösser Wichtigkeit" [a correct understanding of the meaning of this silence is of the greatest importance for the whole understanding of Buddhism] (Beckh [1958], p. 113). Nagao (1955) also cites this observation.

<sup>79</sup> "Buddha's silence is an indication of his conviction in the inexpressibility of certain truths of spiritual life. It does not mean that he held negative views and had not the courage to express them," asserts Radhakrishnan (1934), p. 352.

<sup>80</sup> Here is a nice way to say it in Buddhist language: "A Confucian once went to the twenty-eighth Buddhist patriarch, Bodhidharma, for the sake of the 'pacification of his soul.' The patriarch addressed him thus: 'show me your soul and I shall pacify it for you.' The Confucian replied, 'This is precisely my sorrow, that I fail to find it.' Whereupon Bodhidharma told him, 'Your wish has been granted.' The Confucian understood and departed in peace." As recounted by Suzuki (1906–1907), p. 13.

<sup>81</sup> We must also consider the difference between Mahāyāna Buddhism, inclined to metaphysical interpretation of silence, and Theravāda Buddhism, with its inclination to avoid any reference to metaphysics.

<sup>82</sup> This cannot be said, however, when he refuses to give information on karma. See DN III.134; SN III.103.

Tradition recalls the Buddha's love for silence:<sup>83</sup> his observation of silence, his advice to keep silence,<sup>84</sup> such that a characteristic of Buddhist gatherings was the absence of noise.<sup>85</sup> Noble silence is part and parcel of the Buddhist spirit,<sup>86</sup> as it is of any monastic institution.<sup>87</sup> Not only does the Buddha preach against every idle word but considers every word to be idle when considering the ultimate mystery of reality.

His famous "hearing" with Brahmā after his enlightenment is instructive here. (It is also interesting to note that orthodox commentators reject this narration as spurious, because it seems to prove that the Buddha was not omniscient<sup>88</sup> after the experience of Bodhgaya.) In this story the Buddha's first reaction is to withdraw into absolute silence and to communicate his intuition to no one. Brahmā insists that he reconsider, and the Buddha asks him whether he, the Buddha, will find many disciples capable of understanding his message.<sup>89</sup> According to the legend, Brahmā reassured him, but the Enlightened One decided to speak only of the path to reach the goal, not of the goal itself—of that ultimate and most sublime truth that is *nirvāṇa*.<sup>90</sup> So seriously did Gautama take the incommunicability of the supreme experience that from this time forward he no longer sought to communicate it or speak of it. Ultimate reality, by virtue of its very ultimacy, has no need of our comprehension, our care, or indeed, that we should worry about it at all.<sup>91</sup> To treat it as "something" that is in some manner dependent on our knowledge, our care, our affirmation or negation, our learning, experience, or whatever, would be still a way to consider it as something intra-mundane, as one more concern of beings, however earnest the protest of our lips and even of our heart that it is sublime, transcendent, and ineffable.

The Tathāgata has "arrived," and there is no returning for him. He will show the path but will say nothing of the goal, for he would thereby disfigure it; he would risk directing men toward what they desire, think, feel, and believe is the goal, and not toward that ineffable, inexistent goal that no one has seen,<sup>92</sup> where no one has entered alive,<sup>93</sup> and where every word must withdraw and depart.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>83</sup> See the *appasaddakamo*, in MN II.4, 5; II.23; Mil 371; SNi IV.14 (925)

<sup>84</sup> See the texts in C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1931), p. 185; Pande (1957), pp. 391 ff.

<sup>85</sup> See, DN I, 160, MN I, 524 [Mahā Sakuludāyī Sutta 77].

<sup>86</sup> See MN I, 161 [Ariyapariyesana Sutta 26] SNi III, 11 (723).

<sup>87</sup> See the well-known biblical *sedere et tacere* in Lam 3:28, the locus classicus of Christian monastic silence; see also the following text, selected at random from among a thousand: "luge quippe silentium et ab omni strepitu saecularium perpetua quies cogit coelestia meditare" [Continuous silence, perpetual quiet, far from all bustle and noise, constrains one to meditate celestial things] Bernard, Epistulae 78.4 (PL 182, 193).

<sup>88</sup> Sarvajña. "A point on which the Buddhist tradition is unanimous" (Pande (1957), p. 383).

<sup>89</sup> See SN I.136. See also C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1938).

<sup>90</sup> See N. M. Dutt (1930), p. 100.

<sup>91</sup> "Caecilius, dans l'Octavius (13.1) loue la discrétion de Socrate. Quand on l'interrogeait sur les choses du ciel, il répondait: 'Ce qui est au-dessus de nous, comment le connaître? 'Quod supra nos, nihil ad nos'" [Caecilius, in his Octavius (13.1), praises Socrates's discretion. When questioned about celestial matters, he responded, 'How can we know what is above us?' {Quod supra nos, nihil ad nos}], Festugière (1932), p. 34. See Gronovius (1709), p. 128, who cites Lactantius III.19; Girolamus, In *Apolog. adv. Rufinum* VIII; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I, folio 710; and other ancient authors who have commented on Socrates's dictum "Quod supra nos, nihil ad nos." (Octavius is a satirical work by Minucius Felix, third century, in form of dialogue between the Christian Octavius and the pagan Cecilius.)

<sup>92</sup> See 1 Jn 4:12 and other New Testament passages.

<sup>93</sup> See, in the Jewish tradition, Ex 33:20 and similar Old Testament texts.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, "Yato vāco nivartante," in TU II.4.1 (II. 9), and other similar passages.

It was not my intention to offer an exhaustive catalogue of the various opinions of Buddhism specialists, but only to give an order to what I consider the most important opinions.<sup>95</sup> What has been said so far will be enough to enable us to proceed with our study of so-called Buddhist atheism.

### The Buddhist Religiosity

"Atheism is a cruel undertaking. To carry it to its ultimate consequences costs dearly. And I think I have taken it to the very end."<sup>96</sup> Atheism, in this meaningful statement, is found at the end of a journey (at the conclusion of a prolonged and largely shared personal and collective Western experience) and is transformed by virtue of its very radicality into a religious attitude. Atheism is here a religious atheism. With the Buddha, by contrast, atheism is present from the beginning, at the very onset of his reform. His religious atheism is such because it is an atheistic religion.<sup>97</sup>

Buddhism's credentials as a religion have been called into question only by those who confuse religion with a given doctrine concerning transcendent truths—in other words, by those who, in denying the dynamic nature of all religion (in its orthopraxis), seek to reduce it simply to orthodoxy. Yet no religion is content with being mere doctrine.<sup>98</sup> The task of religion is to lead man to his true end, and religion requires of him the sacred action that will save him—although the end may be defined in the most diverse ways and sacred action in multiple forms or even as mere openness or passivity. Not all religions are religions of "salvation" in the monotheistic sense of the word. It is precisely by reason of its eminently religious nature that Buddhism eschews all ties to doctrine and renounces all speculation. Thus, in a certain sense, the very fact of speculation is to the Buddha an indication that one has not reached the goal. The Buddha himself is credited with the now classic parable of the person wounded by an arrow who wanted to know what type of weapon it was, where it had come from, who had shot it, for what reason, and so on. Such a "metaphysician" would have surely died without learning the answers.<sup>99</sup> Humanity wounded by the arrow of suffering must first eliminate the suffering and save itself. Christian tradition also warns us that "time

<sup>95</sup> By way of example, we recall here the names of such great scholars as Walpole Rihula, André Bareau, Erich Frauwallner, Etienne Lamotte, Giuseppe Tucci, Jean Przyluski, Robert Caesar Childers, and Christian Lassen, as well as many others, including those already mentioned or those who will be mentioned in the following pages.

<sup>96</sup> Sartre (1964): "L'athéisme est une entreprise cruelle et de longue haleine," quoted by S. Päniker (1965), p. 109, who comments, "But to lead someone to an end, whatever it may be, is a profession of faith." The same passage is commented by Santoni (1987), p. 249. See also "Atheism today has been raised to the rank of a substitute for religion with its Deities" (Nishitani [1962]), p. 680.

<sup>97</sup> "Atheistic religion" seems to me to be a more precise description of Buddhism than religious atheism," applied to both Buddhism and Brahmanism by Leeuw (1956), p. 194.

<sup>98</sup> "Das Wesen der Religion besteht nicht in einer bestimmten rational zu erfassenden statischen Vorstellung des Göttlichen, sondern in einem dynamischen Umgang mit dem Heiligen: Religion ist nicht ein blosses Denken an oder über transzendente Objekte, sondern ein Handeln. . . Religion ist keine theoretische, sondern eine höchst praktische Angelegenheit. . . Religion ist . . . Anbetung des Mysteriums und Hingabe an dieses" [The essence of religion consists not in a particular representation of the divine to be grasped statically, but in a dynamic intercourse with the sacred. Religion is not a simple act of thinking of or about transcendent objects, but an action. . . Religion is not a theoretical affair, but an eminently practical one. . . Religion is . . . the worship of Mystery and devotion to the same] (Heiler [1961], pp. 561–62).

<sup>99</sup> See MN 1.430 (Cūḷa Māluṅkya Sutta 63). See above and below.

is short"<sup>100</sup> and must be "redeemed,"<sup>101</sup> not wasted with "vain philosophy,"<sup>102</sup> and admonishes us not to love the world too much<sup>103</sup> since the structure of the *kosmos* is impermanent.<sup>104</sup>

What is impermanent offers no occasion for gladness, deserves no salutation, or has any value worthy of our aspiration.<sup>105</sup>

### *The Four Noble Truths*

It is in this context that the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha's first sermon in Vārāṇasī should be placed.<sup>106</sup> Together with the Eightfold Path to attainment, they constitute the core of all Buddhism.<sup>107</sup> The following is the translation, which I include to give the reader the opportunity to savour the atmosphere of such "atheistic" religion:<sup>108</sup>

Thus have I heard:<sup>109</sup> Once the Exalted One was dwelling near Vārāṇasī, at Isipatana, in the Deer-Park.

Then the Exalted One thus spake unto the company of five monks:<sup>110</sup>

"Monks, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth as a wanderer. What are they? Devotion to the pleasures of sense, a low and

<sup>100</sup> See 1 Cor 7:29 and Rom 13:11.

<sup>101</sup> See Eph 5:16; Col 4:5.

<sup>102</sup> Col 2:8.

<sup>103</sup> See 1 Jn 2:15.

<sup>104</sup> See 1 Cor 7:31.

<sup>105</sup> MN II.263.

<sup>106</sup> *Ariya-saccāni* (in Sanskrit *ārya-sātyani*), whence the translation by some as "noble truths."

<sup>107</sup> As we know, this same notion appears in non-Buddhist texts, such as, for example, YSBh II.15: *saṃsāra, saṃsārahetu, mokṣa, mokṣopāya* (worldly existence, the cause for worldly existence, liberation, the path of liberation); NBh I.1.1, etc., and that serious doubts have arisen as to the primitive authenticity of the *ariya-saccāni*. See a summary of the controversy in Pande (1957), pp. 397ff. In short, we may say that, although the text of the first Vārāṇasī sermon may be a later monastic formulation, the spirit and the ideas correspond to the Buddha's authentic message.

<sup>108</sup> The parallel between the fourfold Buddhist division and the fourfold medical approach, as more than one scholar has pointed out, is significant. It represents one more connection between the Buddha and the scientific, secular spirit. See the commentary on YS II.15 (traditionally attributed to Vedavyāsa): "Just as the medical system has four divisions—disease, cause of disease, health, and remedy—this system, as well, presents four moments: the cycle of rebirths, the cause of the cycle of rebirths, liberation, and the path to liberation."

<sup>109</sup> Here we have the celebrated *iti vuttaka* ("thus I have heard") that introduces so many sayings attributed to the Buddha. See also the traditional Buddhist expression, *evaṃ māyā śrutam ekasmin samaye* "once in a given circumstance I was given to hear. . . ." attributed to Nāgārjuna in the meticulously documented translation of Lamotte (1944–1949), 1:56–114.

<sup>110</sup> See another text, with its full awareness that the first Vārāṇasī sermon contains, in essence, the whole of the "revelation," and that it basically expresses the Buddha's entire mission: it not only sets in motion the "wheel of existence" (see MN I.171), but it also has a strictly religious meaning and even expresses an authentic personal theism: "It was in this deer park of Vārāṇasī that the discoverer of the truth, the holy and enlightened one [*arhat*], set in motion the sublime wheel of the *dhamma* that no one will ever be able to reverse, neither a penitent, a brahmin, God, Māra, or even Brahmā himself, nor anyone else in the universe: that is, the proclamation of the Four Noble Truths, the teaching, declaration, and institution of these Four Noble Truths, with their setting forth, exposition, and manifestation" (MN III.248).

vulgar practice, unworthy, unprofitable, leading to rebirth (on the one hand); and (on the other) devotion to self-mortification, which is also painful, unworthy, and unprofitable. By avoiding these two extremes the Tathāgata has gained knowledge of that *middle path* which giveth vision and understanding, which leads to peace, enlightenment, *nibbāna*.<sup>111</sup>

"And what, monks, is that middle path which giveth vision and understanding, which leads to peace, enlightenment, *nibbāna*?

"This is the middle path that leads to the extinction of suffering: this is the Noble Eightfold Way (*aṭṭhaṅgikamagga*), namely: Right vision, right intent (representation), right speech, right behavior (action), right means of living, right effort (application), right memory (attention and mindfulness), right concentration (devotion, spiritual attitude).<sup>112</sup>

"Behold, monks, that middle path which giveth vision and understanding, which leads to peace, enlightenment, *nibbāna*.

"Now this, monks, is the Noble Truth about suffering:<sup>113</sup>

"Birth is suffering, decay is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering; likewise sorrow and grief, woe, lamentation, and despair. To be conjoined with things which we dislike: to be separated from things which we like—that also is suffering. Not to get what one wants—that also is suffering. In a word, this body, these five *khandha* are suffering."<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> The passage from the MN cited in the preceding note presents the classic summary of the four truths: "suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path leading to the cessation of suffering." The key words are, respectively, *dukkha*, *samudaya*, *nirodha*, and *maggā*.

<sup>112</sup> It is practically impossible to translate in simple words the concepts of the Eightfold Path. Even the adjective "right" for *sammā* is not wholly adequate. *Sammā* also means perfect, balanced, complete. We might have translated "perfect evaluation, perfect thought, perfect word, perfect action, perfect life, perfect discipline, perfect awareness, perfect spirituality." To give an example of the various versions of this fundamental text, we mention the classic translation by Foucher, followed by Lamotte (1958), p. 28. "C'est ce chemin sacré, à huit branches, qui s'appelle foi pure, volonté pure, langage pur, action pure, moyens d'existence pure, application pure, mémoire pure, méditation pure" [It is this sacred eightfold path which is called pure faith, pure will, pure language, pure action, pure means of subsistence, pure application, pure memory, pure meditation]. The Pāli text says, "Sammā diṭṭhi, sammā sankappo, sammā vāco, sammā kammanto, sammā ājīvo, sammā vāyāmo, sammā sati, sammā samādhī."

<sup>113</sup> *Dukkha* in Pāli, *Duḥkha* in Sanskrit. See, "All that exists is suffering (*Sabbe saṃkhāra dukkha*)—" "All created things are sorrowful," as S. Radhakrishnan translates (1968), p. 146. "When through wisdom, [this] is discovered, then one is not touched by suffering; this is the path to purity" (Dh XX.6 [278]). The root *duḥ-* means to be wasted, to squander oneself, and hence to commit sin and impurity, to be at fault, to be harmed, to perish, etc. *Duḥkha* would come from *duḥ-* and from the "praktized" form of *stha*, originally meaning to be ill or ill at ease, uncomfortable; to be unhappy, poor, miserable, etc. See the special issue of *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (1985) dedicated to the study of *duḥkha* and the most recent work by Chinchore (1993).

<sup>114</sup> The five *khandha* (groups, aggregates) that constitute the psychological ego and, according to Buddhism (see *Buddhaghosa Vis-Mag*, XIV.443–48; Warren [1922], p. 132), must be discovered in order to bring to light the insubstantiality of the subject, are: the forms, the sensations (which may include the sentiments), the perceptions (including the dispositions of will), the psychic dispositions (and also the impressions), and (intellectual) consciousness. Strictly speaking, we are dealing with patterns of learning, *upādābakkhandha* (Sanskrit *upādānaskandha*), or as Lamotte (1958, p. 28) translates, following the lesson of his mentor Foucher, "en résumé les cinq sorte d'objets de l'attachement sont douleur" [in short, the five groups of objects of attachment are suffering].

"Now this, monks, is the Noble Truth about the origin of suffering:<sup>115</sup> It is that thirst<sup>116</sup> that leads to rebirth, with its lust and desire, seeking satisfaction now here, now there: namely, the thirst for sensual pleasure, the thirst for rebirth, the thirst for existence to end. Such, monks, is the Noble Truth about the origin of suffering.

"And this, monks, is the Noble Truth about the ceasing of suffering:<sup>117</sup> Verily it is the utter suppression of such thirst, its destruction, forsaking, renouncing, being liberated from it and remaining detached from such thirst."<sup>118</sup>

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 "Now, monks, so long as my triple knowledge with its twelvefold insights<sup>119</sup> had not been purified by these Four Noble Truths, so long, oh monks, in this world, together with its Devas,<sup>120</sup> its Māra,<sup>121</sup> its Brahmā,<sup>122</sup> with its ascetics and brahmins, its spirits and men, I awaited the complete and supreme enlightenment."<sup>123</sup>

<sup>115</sup> See PED, 687–88: *samudaya* [sam+udaya]: source, origin; not to be confused with *samuddaya*: multitude, quantity. The origin of suffering *dukkha-samudaya*. See DN III.136.

<sup>116</sup> It is generally customary to translate "desire" or "appetite," but the literal translation of *taṇhā* (in Sanskrit *trṣṇā*) is "thirst." For this important concept, see AN III.416; IV.400; Iti 30, 50, 58, 105; MN I.6; I.51; II.256; SN I.1; I.8, etc. See also Pande (1957), pp. 434, 400. We are inevitably brought to a philosophical and theological monograph on the series of concepts at play in the Buddhist anthropological dynamism, with an exposition of their connotation, both ethical and metaphysical, and a comparison with Western anthropology, especially scholastic anthropology. A distinction should be made between desire and aspiration. The first has a final aim, is object of the will, is moved by a *telos*; the second corresponds to an inner act of the person, the dynamism of being.

<sup>117</sup> Here, too, some scholars translate with a certain freedom. We are dealing with a triple anthropological thirst: a thirst for affirmation, a thirst for being affirmed, and a thirst for negation—in other words, an appetite for pleasure (*kāma*, love, pleasure), for existence (*bhāva*, being), and for nonexistence (*vibhava*, non-being). Let us not forget that both existence and nonexistence have an intramundane relationship with transmigration, as we see from the classic Tibetan translations. Filliozat poignantly comments: "La première sorte s'explique d'elle même: les désirs sont causes de douleur parce qu'ils ne peuvent être indéfiniment satisfaits et aussi parce qu'ils s'attachent aux existences douloureuses. La deuxième vise l'appétit direct de ces existences. La troisième est un appétit du néant qui, pour inverse qu'il soit dans son objet, n'en est pas moins un appétit et, comme tel, un acte qui porte fruit en existence; suicide entraîne renaissance" [The first kind is self-explanatory: desires are causes of suffering because they cannot be indefinitely satisfied, as well as because they become attached to painful existences. The second bears on the direct appetite of these existences. The third is an appetite for nothingness, which, contrary to what it is in its object, is no less an appetite, and as such an act that bears fruit in existence: suicide entails rebirth] (Filliozat [1953], pp. 2:2247).

<sup>118</sup> *Nirodha* is from the root *rudh-* "to obstruct." With the particle *ni*, it acquires the meaning of imprisoning, shutting up, suppressing, destroying, controlling, restraining, halting, and so on. See YS I.2: *Yogacittavṛtti nirodhaḥ* [Yoga is the suppression of mental functions].

<sup>119</sup> See SN XXII. 90. See Warren (1922), p. 165.

<sup>120</sup> See later the comments to the *Avyakṛtaustāni* chapter.

<sup>121</sup> *Māra* is something similar to the "prince of this world," and has been likened to the demon of Christianity. See Windisch (1895); other bibliographical references are in Glaser (1954), p. 19.

<sup>122</sup> *Brahmā*, although being the most important God of the Buddhist pantheon, bears no resemblance to the *brahman* of Upaniṣadic speculation. The God *Brahmā* is not omniscient (see DN I.221), although he is acknowledged as a kind of *Īśvara*, or "omnipotent creator and lord of the earth, father of all that has come and will come to be" (DN I.18), he nevertheless belongs to the *saṃsāra*, to the brahminic *brahmaloka*, and according to Buddhist teaching can in no wise be equated with *nirvāṇa*. There are even texts that present *Brahmā* as the Buddha's devoted worshipper.

<sup>123</sup> SN V.420ff.

I have cited this passage *in extenso* not only because of its capital importance for all Buddhism, but also because it will be of service in the elucidation of the precise point of my investigation, the "atheism" of the Buddha.<sup>124</sup>

I do not intend to elaborate on the content of the text,<sup>125</sup> but simply to note its eminently religious nature despite the fact that neither the word "God" nor the corresponding concept occurs.

The entire text breathes a climate of salvation. Care is taken to leave the absolute free and uncontaminated, and thus to exclude all contingent existence, or *samsāra*. (Hence the reference to the cycle of births improperly called "reincarnation.") Our experience is always an experience of contingency and, although there may be reasons to think that the absolute is met at the end of human experience, even such possible experience of the absolute would, as such, be a contingent experience. God is never strictly experienced *in se*.<sup>126</sup>

Even admitting an absolute object (which, in actual fact, would be a pure contradiction), the subject experiencing it would still be contingent, would not be self-sustaining, would not be, strictly speaking, an ultimate, true *sub-jectum*. What remains for the human being to do, then, is to consider his condition and assess his fundamental structure. According to our text, the fundamental structure of the concrete human subject is suffering.<sup>127</sup> The elimination of contingency is the supreme toil of human endeavor; thus through it the end of suffering is achieved.

It should not be said, from a Christian point of view, that Buddhism ascribes too much importance to suffering. The place of suffering is, if anything, even more central for a certain Christian spirituality, as evinced by history and by Christian doctrine. The passion of Christ represents the supreme apotheosis of suffering, a suffering hypostatized in God itself. It was necessary for Christ to suffer and die.<sup>128</sup> God did not spare his own Son,<sup>129</sup> and it seems that for love of the world He delivered him up to death.<sup>130</sup> The Son of Man also surrenders to suffering, against his own will, in order to fulfill the will of the Father.<sup>131</sup> Theologians may well consider that the essence of the cross is immolation for love rather than suffering—but the fact remains that, in the course of the events, suffering took on a rather central role in Christianity.<sup>132</sup> Indeed, whereas Hinduism seeks to eliminate pain and Buddhism to destroy it, Christianity faces it squarely and strives to give meaning to it: partaking of the sufferings of Christ.<sup>133</sup> Undoubtedly, the ideal of the acceptance of pain (*ἀπάθεια*, *apatheia*) is not

<sup>124</sup> For a detailed scholarly commentary, see Lamotte (1958), pp. 28–52.

<sup>125</sup> "It would be presumptuous to remark upon the depth of the insight revealed in these statements. They have no parallel, that I know of, in the religious literature of the West" (Graham [1964], p. 14).

<sup>126</sup> "As Eriugena justly remarks, 'God does not know what he is, because he is not any what' (see the Buddhist *akiñcana*). It is only his possibilities of manifestation that become 'whats' of which there can be science or omniscience" (Coomaraswamy [1944], p. 13). See the Eriugena passage quoted further on.

<sup>127</sup> It would be interesting to compare these Buddhist principles with Freud's principles of psychoanalysis, since he singles out as central in human beings the desire for pleasure and the care to avoid suffering. See Silva (1973) and (though it contains no reference to Buddhism) Brown (1957).

<sup>128</sup> See Lk 24:7, 26.

<sup>129</sup> See Rom 8:32.

<sup>130</sup> See Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:9.

<sup>131</sup> See Jn 4:34; 5:30; Mt 26:42; Lk 22:42; Heb 5:7; 10:9; etc.

<sup>132</sup> See 1 Pet 4:13; Rom 8:17; Acts 5:41; etc. Consider also the attitude of saints like Francis of Assisi.

<sup>133</sup> One misunderstanding does not justify another. To categorize the devotion to the crucified Christ as a "sadistic impulse of a psychically affected brain," as does Suzuki (1957), p. 136, would be an example of a misunderstanding on the Buddhist side. The same author, in the same chapter, "Crucifixion and Enlightenment," seeking to contrast these two attitudes, describes them in depth: "What is needed

only Stoic but also Christian.<sup>134</sup> I would venture to say, in fact, that in the third millennium, Christian self-comprehension (which I have called Christianness) will be centered more on the resurrection than on the crucifixion, more on the Trinity than on monotheism.

Nowhere has the Buddha said that Being (as understood by the *āstika*) is suffering, or that non-being is happiness. To label him a pessimist appears rather gratuitous. To the Buddha, suffering is not inherent to ultimate reality, and can, therefore, be eliminated.

Suffering is inherent only in existence—in the desire (thirst) to be. What is to be eliminated is not being (this would be a meaningless proposition anywhere in India: if being could somehow turn into unbeing, it would not be genuine being)—but rather suffering, all the negative elements of existence. The Buddha goes further: being does not exist, “is not,” since having and being are categories of contingency and hence shot through with limitation. The path to salvation is not that of speculation, but that of the concrete *praxis* of the elimination of suffering—and thereby of all limitation, contingency, and “creatureliness”—to avail ourselves of non-Buddhist categories.

Sākyamuni could have said also these words:

I tell you, brothers, the time is short. From now on, those with wives should live as if they had none; those who weep should live as though they were not weeping, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing; buyers should conduct themselves as though they owned nothing, and those who make use of the world as though they were not using it. For the world as we know it is passing away. I would have you free from cares.<sup>135</sup>

### *The Message of Buddha*

That things have being, Kaccāna, constitutes one extreme; that things have no being, the other extreme. These two extremes, Kaccāna, have been avoided by the Tathāgata, and this is the middle path that he teaches.<sup>136</sup>

in Buddhism is enlightenment, neither crucifixion nor resurrection. A resurrection is dramatic and human enough, but there is still the odour of the body in it. In enlightenment there are heavenliness and a genuine sense of transcendence. Things of earth go through renovation and refreshing transformation. A new sun rises above the horizon and the whole universe is revealed” (ibid., pp. 132–33).

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, the grandiose description of the “true Gnostic” in Clement of Alexandria—e.g., the entire book 7 of the *Stromata* (PG 9:401). The following is an example from the previous book: “[The Gnostic] desires nothing (οὐδὲ ζηλοῖ), as he lacks nothing to be assimilated to Him who is good and beautiful. He loves no one with a common love (οὐδὲ ἅρα ἔχει τινά τὴν κοινὴν ταυτὴν ἰλίαν), but loves the creator through the creatures (ἀλλὰ ἀγαπᾷ τὸν κτίστην διὰ τῶν κτισμάτων). He falls victim to no desire (ἐπιθυμία), or appetite (ὀρεξις), for he lacks no good of the soul, united as he is by love to the friend to whom he belongs by free election. . . . If the gnostic has no desire, adversaries will say, how can he love? But such as these know not the divine character of love (τὸ θεῖον τῆς ἀγάπης). After all, love is not an appetite, a desire (ὀρεξις) of the one loving: it is a loving intimacy (στερκτική δὲ οἰκειώσις—benevola coniunctio) that establishes the Gnostic in oneness of faith, without any more need of time and space.” “Non est enim utique charitas eius qui diligit appetitio, sed a benevola conjunctione, in unitatem fidei restituens eum qui est gnosticus, locu et tempore minime indigentem,” as Migne’s Latin version has it. See *Stromata* VI. 9 (PG 9:293). Christ is the gnōsis of God, says Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Ephesios* VII.

<sup>135</sup> 1 Cor 7:29–32. This “appearance” (σχήμα “figure”) is very important in the Hindū-Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

<sup>136</sup> SN XXII.90. See Warren (1922), p. 165. This text will be gathered and commented by



To paraphrase: it is as risky and false to assert that God exists (understanding existence in the only way we can understand it, unless "enlightenment" were to allow an immediate insight into the other side of the question) as to assert that God does not exist. But in a Buddhist context we should at once add: to deny that God exists is an equally false extreme as to deny that God does not exist. The Buddha's claim is precisely to be able to make all of these propositions without falling into agnosticism.

The notion that God is beyond our normal means of comprehension, that God can be known only inadequately, is common to many religions. In order to express this difficulty in the knowledge of God, the Christian refers to the alternate use of a pair of opposites, knowledge and ignorance, precisely to stress the inadequacy of our cognitive faculties.<sup>137</sup> The Buddha, with his concern to avoid extremes, proceeds differently. The passage cited above claims that, in the final analysis, the fact of knowing whether being or non-being is at the root of things is of no consequence. The Awakened One keeps to the simple observation of the relativity of the degree of truth contained in either of these opposite propositions. Shortly before, according to Ānanda's account, the Sublime One had told Kaccānagotta,

This world is generally related to either being or non-being. Surely, to those who consider wisely and according to truth the processes of generation and apparition in this world, non-being is not really of this world; likewise, to those who consider wisely and according to truth the processes of destruction and disappearance in this world, being is not really of this world.<sup>138</sup>

The Buddha's message can be summed up in what tradition records as his last words: "Work [realize, bring about, perform] your salvation with diligence."<sup>139</sup>

Nāgārjuna, to establish the truth (*dhamma*) of his *doctrina media*, the Mādhyamika. See MK XV.7 (ed. La Vallée Poussin), as well as already cited texts.

<sup>137</sup> See the following traditional Christian propositions: (ἐν ἀγνοσίᾳ τὴν περὶ αὐτοῦ κτῶμενα γνῶσιν) [Through ignorance let us acquire knowledge of Him], Dionysius the Aeropagite, *De Divinis Nominibus*, in St. Maximinus, as well as Scholia in Dionysius the Aeropagite (PG 4:216; ἀγνοσίᾳ γὰρ γίγνεται γνῶστός ὁ θεός) [For God becomes known by ignorance], *ibid.*; (καὶ διὰ γνῶσεως ὁ θεός γινώσκεται, καὶ διὰ ἀγνοσίᾳ) [God is known both through knowledge and through ignorance], Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus* VII.3 (PG 3:872). St. Thomas embraces fully the same tradition when he repeatedly states that God "cognoscitur tam quam ignotus" [is known as unknown], *In Boethii De Trinitate, Proemium*; q.1, a.2, ad 1 and also q.1, a.1; "Hoc ipsum est Deum cognoscere, quod nos scimus ignorare de Deo quid sit" [Knowing God consists precisely in this, that we know that we are ignorant of what God is] (*Commentarium in Dionysium* VII.14); or again, "Illum est ultimum cognitionis humanae de Deo quod sciat se Deum nescire" [The highest degree of human cognition of God is to know that one does not know God] (*De Potentia* VII.5–14, etc).

<sup>138</sup> See SN XXII.90. See Mensching, *Geisteswelt*, p. 82.

<sup>139</sup> "Work out your salvation with diligence," is the translation of Coomaraswamy (1928), p. 75, following the classical version of the MhpārnibS by T. W. Rhys Davids (1965), p. 114: "Behold now, brethren, I exhort you, saying, 'Decay is inherent in all component things: Work out your salvation with diligence!' This was the last word of the Tathāgata" (MhpārnibS VI.10 (DN II.156); T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids (1965) (DN II.156) also translate, "Work out your salvation with diligence." "Strive diligently" is the 1968 translation (p. 32) of Radhakrishnan. The traditional words are *Appamādena sampadetha*. The entire text is preceded by *vayadhammā saṃkharā*, generally translated as, "All things are bound to decay." Doubts have been expressed as to the authenticity of the MhpārnibS. Silburn (1955), p. 170, compares this passage, "En vérité. O disciples, toutes les énergies constructrices sont impermanentes, travaillez efficacement sans relâche... Soyez d'intention bien concentrée. Surveillez

In other words, abandon speculation and concentrate on the one thing needful for salvation.<sup>140</sup> This is what is all-important, and I have shown you the way: the way of the elimination of everything that limits us, the criterion and manifestation of which are precisely pain and suffering.<sup>141</sup>

The Buddha "has no theories,"<sup>142</sup> but as Buddhism has observed from ancient times, the renunciation of metaphysics is itself metaphysics. To reject all philosophical systems is only to replace the concept of philosophy as knowledge of reality with that of philosophy as the path for the attainment of that same reality.<sup>143</sup> When the way of salvation shifts from religion to pure theory, Gnosticism is born.

On the other hand, the explicit desire to avoid bondage to theory involves a greater flexibility than does acknowledgment of a given doctrine. This is why so few cultures in the world offer a greater and more varied flowering of schools than does Buddhism. It will not be out of place, then, to attempt to retranslate the Buddha's basic intuition in somewhat metaphysical terms.<sup>144</sup>

Salvation must be attained with "diligence." Now, this salvation cannot be attained if one remains strapped to the finite, for salvation is infinite—hence the importance of a radical dispossession, including renunciation of any conceptual formulation. Salvation consists in the elimination of suffering, for it is in suffering that our limitation is expressed and crystalized. When Christian scholasticism sees in happiness, in *beatitudo*, the essence of the life to come, man's end, and therefore the anthropological dimension of the union with God, it is not saying something different.<sup>145</sup> Reaching such *beatitudo* may be the goal, but man can never fully achieve it, or even know just what it is, in this life. By contrast,

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la pensée" [In truth, Disciples, all constructive energies are transitory; toil, efficaciously and without stint. . . . Be of a concentrated intention. Keep watch over thought] with the solemn words of Indra when the Buddha entered *nibbāna*: "transitory indeed are the constructive energies (*samkhāra*), submitted to appearance and disappearance. As they are born, so they die; their quieting is well-being" (happiness, *sukha*): DN II.157 (p. 175 of PTS edition, 1889).

<sup>140</sup> Hence the insistence on *kiriya* and *akiriya* "what ought to be done" and "what ought not to be done." See, e.g., AN IV.173; IV.183; SN III.208; VP L235, etc. See also other parallel texts quoted further on.

<sup>141</sup> It would be interesting to compare the cited text with St. Paul's: "Work diligently to bring about your own salvation" (τὴν ἐαυτῶν σωτηρίαν κατεργάζεσθε) (Phil 2:12). There is a New Testament term that by its very composition indicates perseverance and a persevering tension and constitutes a key concept for the understanding of the parallel Christian attitude. "By patient endurance you will save your lives" (Lk 21:19); "If we persevere with him we shall also reign with him," (2 Tim 2:12); see also Mt 24:13; Mk 13:13, etc. This same expectant perseverance has an important role in primitive patristic spirituality: see Kraft (1964) for the listing under voice (ὁπομιένω). For a theological development of tolerance, see Panikkar (1961/4), pp. 118ff. We must, of course, keep in mind the diversity of outlook of the Buddhist and Christian positions.

<sup>142</sup> See MN 1.486 and many other texts.

<sup>143</sup> In Buddhism, the *Mādhyamika* would be the most characteristic example of this mentality.

<sup>144</sup> See, e.g., Glasenapp (1962/2), pp. 38–46, and his discussion with Edgerton (1952), pp. 81–85. Whereas the first believes he can assert that "Buddha genauso wie die anderen Lehrer seiner Zeit bestimmtes metaphysisches System gelehrt hat" [the Buddha, just as the other teachers of his time, taught a certain metaphysical system], the second denies this solution, although recognizing that "premises" of a metaphysical order are to be found in the Buddha's position. What seems precarious in both studies is their manner of arriving at their conclusions: seeking a rational, not to say rationalistic answer to the *aporiae* of the celebrated *avyākṛtāvastuni* (the Buddha's questions, see further on).

<sup>145</sup> By way of an example and on scholastic themes, see the many volumes by Ramirez (1944).

suffering falls altogether within the sphere of our experience, and the path to its elimination is precisely what the Buddha proclaims, through the discovery of its origin in the thirst that is constitutive of the creature, that is of its very being. Indeed, existence not only constitutes the tension of being *extra causas*, but represents the very nature of that "being" which is not for itself, *a se*.<sup>146</sup> So long as beings think that they are Being itself, or simply believe they are or even desire to be, they will suffer, because they are not, at least not yet, Being. The elimination of suffering that the Buddha proposes is not alleviation after the fashion of an analgesic drug, but the radical extirpation of suffering, the destruction of its cause, existence itself, not only such as we live it, but such as we cannot help but live and think it while we are pilgrims in this world.<sup>147</sup>

The desire to attain being, the thirst for being, or for non-being—this is the threefold origin of suffering. Only by eradicating the very appetite that is constitutive of contingent being (and this is tantamount to the elimination of contingency itself—that is, of existence) will it be possible to destroy being's inherent limitation, which is the cause of suffering.<sup>148</sup>

Suffering, produced by any appetite (the desire to attain being), is only overcome by love, that is, by transcending every object of desire. As long as objects are desired, suffering abides. The pain of not being God (the thirst for Being) is not quenched by any hope less than that of being God, but as long as hope abides, the goal has not been reached and the pain remains. The suffering of existence (the thirst for non-being) is eliminated only by faith in the possibility of transcending every being, but as long as we are sustained by faith, we are not sustaining ourselves and therefore we still "are not," and the suffering goes on. There is therefore no solution as long as the contingent individual remains.

Here the old man will raise his anguished objection, strengthened by the powerful, autochthonous Western mind: Is there no other remedy than the disappearance of the "ego"? To which the Buddha will reply: If something is subject to disappearance, the sooner the better; it is the very fear of disappearance that causes suffering, and until one finds rest in what cannot fear disappearance, because it is ontologically impossible that its being cease, one is not even on the road to salvation. The objection will be raised: In such a case, who will be there to find rest? Yet the Buddha will only rejoice for the absence of someone in need of rest. Reality has no need of any rest, no need of support from anything or anyone at all. Reality supports itself of and in itself, although the very expression is meaningless because even the idea of being self-supporting can only be applied to that which still has need of support. If we seek to reach *nirvāṇa* weighed down with such a burden, we shall never get there. The fear of losing what can be lost: this is the cause of the temporal cycle of all existences. Pure "existence" does not exist, nor is it afraid of being lost; it is beyond any anxiety, beyond any fear. It has no fear, because it dwells where suffering has lost its meaning. It has leaped beyond the dimensions of time and space, matter and spirit, essence and existence, men and gods. "Unless one loses his own life . . ."<sup>149</sup>

<sup>146</sup> See the medieval scholastic understanding of *ex-sistere*, which meant "ex aliquo esse habere" (to receive being from someone). See, e.g., Richard of St. Victor, *De Trinitate* IV.12, 19 (PL 196, 938, 942).

<sup>147</sup> We have the same thought in the Christian tradition: "Hoc enim ipsum nomen, 'existentia,' quasi 'extrastantia' indicat" [this very word "existence" would mean something like "standing outside"]. Meister Eckhart, *Liber Parabolarum Genesis* XXIX.11, as cited in Lossky (1960), p. 124.

<sup>148</sup> The Buddha's reaction against sacrifice and the caste system is perhaps more related to the need to cut at the roots the creative act and the status of the preservation of creation than to motives of nonviolence (*ahimsā*) or social justice. See Vesci (1985), in which, according to Brahmanic speculation, the origin of suffering may be traced to the pain contained in the creative act itself, sacrifice.

<sup>149</sup> See Mt 10:39; 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24; 17:33; Jn 12:25; etc.

I beg the reader's indulgence, but I cannot refrain from citing, *in extenso*, though without commentary, the Four Noble Truths of St. John of the Cross.

The following verses describe how to climb the path to the mount of Perfection and give advice on how to avoid misleading paths:

*The way to reach all things*

In order to reach what you do not know  
You must follow a path which you do not know  
In order to reach beyond desire  
You must follow a path with no desire.  
In order to reach what you do not possess,  
You must follow a path on which you have no possessions.  
In order to reach what you are not  
You must follow a path on which you are not.

*The way to obtain all things*

To get to know all things  
Do not desire any knowledge at all.  
To have pleasure in all things,  
Do not desire pleasure at all.  
To be all things,  
Do not desire to be anything at all.

*The way to avoid being an obstacle to all things*

When your mind dwells upon anything,  
cease to attach yourself to all things.  
For, in order to pass from all to all,  
You must let go from all to all.  
And, when you come to possess it all,  
Possess it without desiring anything.  
For if you desire to keep something in having all,  
You have not your treasure pure in God.

*Sign that you have all things*

In this detachment  
the spirit finds peace and rest  
since it covets nothing,  
nothing wearies it in its ascent,  
and nothing oppresses it when it is cast down,  
to the very center of its humility.  
But when it covets anything,  
at that very moment it becomes wearied.

Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. And on the Mount, nothing. There is no longer any path, since for the just there is no law.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Written on the board at the beginning of the ascent of Mount Cannel. See Saint John of the Cross (1975), pp. 72-73.

Never did the Buddha deny existentially what we have come to call ultimate reality.<sup>151</sup> He only rejected any name for it, any determination, whether of "ultimate" or of "reality."<sup>152</sup> He refused to accept any personification of it, since for him, as for the whole tradition of India, personification was tantamount to anthropomorphism. The Buddha rejects any attempt to introduce God through the force of our volitive and intellective formulas. If ultimate reality were the "God" of whom the theists speak, the Buddha replies that it should be responsible for all that transpires here below, including evil. Thus it is with a view to defending all the rights of this ultimate reality that the Buddha refuses to accept theism. To put it another way: It is in order to defend the absolute transcendence of divinity that the Buddha, reasonably enough, denies it. Transcendence itself is actually an anthropocentric notion, since man is its point of reference, which, it must quickly be added, must of course be transcended. The concept is formulated in relation to us. Precisely because the absolute transcends us, it is not a transcendent being. In other words, the absolute is so transcendent that it goes beyond all being, including Being itself. The Buddha would say: If you cannot do without a concept or image of God, so be it; but the highest religion is atheistic, as well as a-polytheistic and a-antitheistic.

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<sup>151</sup> "The idea of *anicca* does not, however, preclude the 'existence' of things, but only their duration. Similarly, the idea of *anattā* does not proclaim that there is no "self," but only that there is no unchangeably continuing self that would persist eternally as a separate unit. Actually, it is precisely the notion of *anicca* that guarantees the possibility of the development and growth of the individual" (Govinda [1961], p. 188).

<sup>152</sup> See Ud VIII.1 and 3 together with Iti 43 against the "uncreated."

## THE TEXTS

*Assaddho akataññū ca sandhicchedo ca yo naro  
hatāvakāso vantaśo sa ve uttarmaporiso.<sup>1</sup>*

The idea that Buddhism is atheistic<sup>2</sup> is founded on four main sources:

1. The common belief that Buddhism denies the existence of the soul, the *ātman*, being or substance (*nairātmyavāda*).
2. The widespread notion that man's end is *nirvāṇa* understood as total extinction and complete annihilation.
3. The discovery of a universal concatenation of all things (*pratītyasamutpāda*) that seems to exclude a transcendent cause.
4. The negative interpretation of the Buddha's silence in response to the human mind's fundamental questions (*avyākṛtavastūni*), especially concerning an afterlife.

In order to develop our answer to the problem of the Buddha's supposed atheism, in the next chapters we shall consider some of the principal texts concerning these four subjects.

Although we do not propose to develop here a historic study of Buddhism, we think that a look at the Buddhist Scriptures and at the texts that we will consider further on may facilitate the comprehension of tradition in its multiple aspects.

The canonical Buddhist texts can be divided into five classes. The first and most ancient texts, belonging to the Theravāda tradition, constitute the Pāli canon. Of this same canon, fragments exist also in Sanskrit, belonging respectively to the Sarvāstivāda, Mūlasarvāstivāda, and Mahāsāṅghika. The posterior Mahāyāna tradition also possesses canonical texts in Sanskrit.

**THERAVĀDA—SCHOOL OF THE FOREFATHERS.** To this school belong the most ancient texts (starting from the fifth century BC) called *Tipiṭaka* (*Tripitaka*), or "three baskets" (*piṭaka*).<sup>3</sup>

1. *Vinaya piṭaka*: Basket of the monastic rule
  - a. *Sutta Vibhaṅga*: Classification of rules
  - Bhikkuvibhaṅga*: Monks' rules
  - Bhikkhunivibhaṅga*: Nuns' rules

<sup>1</sup> A man who no longer needs faith (*assaddho*) and has reached the knowledge of the not done (uncreated; *akata*), who has loosened every bond, who has destroyed every occasion (of good and evil) and has eliminated any desire, this verily is a superior man (*poriso*) (Dh VII.8 [97]).

<sup>2</sup> Considerations of space, time, and simplicity have forced me to omit not only many texts but also a number of concepts such as *dharma*, *śūnyatā*, *prajñā*, etc., that should have been included. I can, however, assure the reader that their inclusion would not alter my conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> The first division of the canon (totally based on the oral tradition) is composed of the *Sutta* and the *Vinaya* (i.e., the body of memorized citations and the rules of the order) (PED [1966], p. 457).

- b. *Khandhakā*: Divisions of texts.  
*Mahāvagga*: Principal section  
*Cullavagga* (*Cūlavagga*): Secondary section
  - c. *Parivāra*: Accessory section. A sort of appendix or index summarizing most *Vinaya* texts.
2. *Sutta Piṭaka*: Basket of texts. Compilation of the discourses of the Buddha and his disciples. They are the most important doctrinal documents and are divided into five *nikāya* (compilations or sections):<sup>4</sup>
- a. *Dīgha Nikāya*: Compilation of long *sutta* (34 groups).
  - b. *Majjhima Nikāya*: Compilation of middle-length *sutta* (152 groups).
  - c. *Saṃyutta Nikāya*: Compilation of combined *sutta* (56 groups).
  - d. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*: Compilation of *sutta* classified by argument (11 groups).
  - e. *Khuddaka Nikāya*: Compilation of 15 short texts, including:
    - I. *Dhammapada*: Verses on the dhamma.
    - II. *Udāna*: Sentences (mostly in metric form).
    - III. *Itivuttaka* (Thus it was spoken): The Buddha's sayings.
    - IV. *Sutta Nipāta*: Compilation of speeches (most of them in verse) on the Buddha, society, and ethics.
    - V. *Theragāthā*: Verses by the Forefathers (monks).
    - VI. *Therīgāthā*: Verses by the Forefathers (nuns).
    - VII. *Jātaka*: Tales of the Buddha's previous incarnations.

Here we could add:

*Milinda Pañha*. Dialogue between the king Milinda and the monk Nāgasena on knowledge and wisdom. The Birman tradition considers it part of the canon. Although a Pāli version exists, it is probable that the original was not in this language.

3. *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* or *Sattapakaraṇa*: The Seven Treatises. A categorized and detailed doctrinal exposition. The most famous commentary of the Pāli canon is the *Visuddhi Magga*, the Path of Perfect Purification, the Buddhaghosa, a treatise that summarizes systematically the whole doctrine.

**SARVĀSTIVĀDA.** Fragments in Sanskrit of the *Vinaya*, the *Sutta*, and other canonical texts. Most of them exist only in Chinese and Tibetan translations.

**MŪLASARVĀSTIVĀDA.** Important part of the *Vinayavatsū* preserved in Kashmir. Fragments from the *Vinaya*. There is a complete version of the *Vinaya* in Tibetan.

**MAHĀSĀNGHIKA.** The *Mahāvastu*, considered the *Vinaya Piṭaka* of this school, although it incorporates a good number of *sutta*-type texts and various legends. The most important fragment of this canon is preserved in Nepal.

**MAHĀYĀNA.** These are later texts—second century (Nāgārjuna)—although some probably date back to the beginning of the Christian era. The two most important schools are the *Mādhyamika* (*Sūnyavāda*) and the *Vijñānavāda* (*Yogācāra*). Among the main *sūtra* of their abundant literature are the following:

- a. *Prajñāpāramitā*: Collection of prose *sūtra* on the Great Wisdom leading to *sūnyatā* (Void).

<sup>4</sup> To the first four, the name of *Āgama* is also given. Those mentioned in Sanskrit are *Dirghāgama*, *Mādhayamāgama*, *Saṃyuktāgama*, and *Ekottarikāgama*.

- b. *Lalitavistara Sūtra*: The Extension of the Game. Legendary narration on the human manifestation of the Buddha.
- c. *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra*: The descent (*avatāra*) of the Buddha to Śrī Lanka. This *sūtra*, through the Buddha's answers to the 108 questions of the *bodhisattva* Mahāmāti, offers an orthodox compendium of the doctrine.
- d. *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*: The Lotus of the True Law. It discusses the nature of the Buddha's *manifestations* and the notions of *buddha* and *bodhisattva*. It also includes several parables.
- e. *Mañjuśrī Mūlakaḥ*: The fundamental *kalpa* of *Mañjuśrī*. The *kalpa* is a treatise of ritual rules. It is a late text, a sort of encyclopaedia including several themes: ritual teaching, astrology, and history.

We emphasize that it is better not to make the texts absolute, since in the end they are the means to ford the current, the raft that is discarded after reaching "the other shore":

"O monks. I will teach you the *dhamma* in order to reach the other shore, not in order to preserve it; listen, pay attention, and I will speak."

"Yes, Lord," the monks agreed.

"If a man meets on his path a wide extension of water and sees that the shore he is on is dangerous and scary and that the other shore is not dangerous and scary, but that there is no ferry nor bridge to reach the other side, such a man might think, 'This is a great extension of water, this shore is dangerous and fearsome while the other shore is not dangerous nor fearsome, but there is neither ferry nor bridge to go from one to the other.' And what if, after gathering stalks, poles, branches, and leaves and having built a raft, boarding this raft, and using his hands and feet he would manage to cross safely to the other side? Well, O monks, such a man after gathering stalks, poles, branches, and leaves and having built a raft, boarding this raft, and using his hands and feet, he will manage to cross safely the waters and reach the other side. Once he reached it he might think, 'This raft has been very useful. Boarding this raft and using my hands and feet I managed to cross safely the waters and reach the other shore. And now, lifting the raft on my head or carrying it on my shoulders why should I not follow my path according to my desire?' What do you think, O monks? Is this man doing with the raft what ought to be done?"

"No, Lord!"

"How should that man behave, O monks, in order to make of the raft that which is good? In this case, O monks, the man who crossed the waters and reached the other side might think, 'this raft has been very useful to me. Boarding this raft and using my hands and feet I managed to cross safely the waters and reach the other shore. And now, after leaving the raft on the dry land, or after sinking it in the water, should I not follow my path according to my desire?' Acting in such a way, O monks, that man would make of the raft that which is good. The same, O monks, must be done with the *dhamma* which I have taught you in order to cross, not in order to be preserved."<sup>5</sup>

And now let us consider our texts.

<sup>5</sup> MN I.134-35.



### Nairātmyavāda

Early twentieth-century Buddhist studies are at pains to distinguish a so-called primitive, or precanonical, Buddhism from the great Buddhist systems of Theravāda and Mahāyāna. Many authors<sup>6</sup> hold that the central teaching of this primitive Buddhism corresponds to the actual ideas of the Buddha. Some, in fact, consider as highly relevant the radical denial of the *ātman*, or of any form of substantiality: there is no soul, there is no "self," there is no substance. This theory, we hear, stands in stark opposition to the other great tradition of Indian wisdom, the *ātma-vāda*, or doctrine of the *ātman*, which reaches its peak in the Upaniṣad. According to other authors,<sup>7</sup> this doctrine is not that of the Buddha himself but a later development, and an interpolation in the texts attributed to the Enlightened One. According to this latter interpretation, the doctrine of the Buddha himself was altogether coherent with the Upaniṣadic tradition, and his occasional denials of the existence of the *ātman* were dictated by pedagogical considerations, with the intent to contrast abusive interpretations.<sup>8</sup>

Without entering now into a merely exegetical discussion, it can scarcely be denied that a series of basic texts, as well as later Buddhist tradition, incline toward the first interpretation. To be sure, the *anātma-vāda* can be interpreted in different ways.<sup>9</sup> For my purposes, however, this is all but indifferent since both in original Buddhism and in its later development the conception of the *anātman* is central to Buddhism as living religion. The living tradition of Buddhism is "anatmic."

An initial difficulty, more serious than might appear at first sight, consists simply in how to translate the word *ātman*. Besides its meaning as a pronoun—demonstrative, indefinite and even reflexive,<sup>10</sup> *ātman* has been translated as "soul,"<sup>11</sup> "substance,"<sup>12</sup> "I,"<sup>13</sup> "oneself," "selfhood," "self,"<sup>14</sup> and so on. One cannot call these translations false, although they do not reflect either the horizon or the concomitance of the original. The question is important, but I shall not address it, and shall simply use the original Sanskrit without attempting a translation. The difficulty is not in the word but in the cultural matrix that generated it. The word *ātman* has a peculiar and polyphonic *dhvani* (connotation).<sup>15</sup> Strictly speaking, the Pāli word used in the writings is *attan* (*atta*) and as such we give it, although we often use in the text the Sanskrit form *ātman*.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Stcherbatsky, V. Bhattacharyya, T. R. V. Murti, and others. For a substantial introduction to the various schools of contemporary buddhology see Regamey (1951), III.2.44–50.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., C. A. F. Rhys David, LaVallée Poussin, and others. See the critique of this position in T. R. V. Murti (1955), pp. 20–35.

<sup>8</sup> This would seem to be the Nāgārjuna interpretation of the Buddha's ambiguity, MK XVIII.6.

<sup>9</sup> Frauwallner (1953–1956, 1:225) believes, as do others, that the question of the "I" is rejected because it distracts one from the goal of salvation, and that the "soul" is not denied, but simply declared not compatible with conceptual understanding.

<sup>10</sup> On *attan* (*ātman*), see the twelfth chapter of the Dh, where, in many verses, it is purely and simply the reflexive pronoun.

<sup>11</sup> See Glasenapp (1954).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> See Frauwallner (1953–1956), 2:220.

<sup>14</sup> This is the current version in the English bibliography. It has the advantage of preserving the grammatical ambiguity of the Sanskrit pronoun/substantive.

<sup>15</sup> We apply the notion of *dhvani* as a hermeneutical principle and not only as an aesthetic or strictly linguistic category. See Ānandavardhana.

Discussions on the correct interpretation of the mind of the Buddha on this point,<sup>16</sup> as well as discussions of the problem itself,<sup>17</sup> are as old as Buddhism<sup>18</sup> and also as recent as any philosophical, theological, or religious encounter with contemporary Buddhism. Indeed it is impossible to engage in a serious philosophical, theological, or religious discussion of Buddhism today without first clarifying whether the cornerstone will be *ātman* or *anātman*.<sup>19</sup>

One point, however, is beyond all question. The Buddha's declared position is equidistant from both extremes. He espouses neither *śāśvataवाद* (eternalism) nor *ucchedeवाद* (nihilism).<sup>20</sup> There is no *ātman*, but neither "is" there an *anātman*. The latter cannot be dealt with as though it were a thing, a sort of negative *ātman* or antistubstance. Buddhist thought calls for new categories and new forms of thought freed from the habit of hypostatization.

Leaving exegetical discussions and nominalistic disputes aside, the *ātman* that the Buddha will not accept may be defined as that imperishable, immortal substance, the subject of all changes, to whose perfection all believers' actions must be directed.<sup>21</sup> There is no subject. There is no *empirical* subject: it is surely evident that an empirical subject cannot be a substrate, but rather stands in need of a foundation itself. There is no *absolute* subject either: from the moment anything becomes a substrate for anything else at all, it is deprived of its "absolute-ness" and transcendence.<sup>22</sup>

The Buddha's intuition is one of pure contingency. It is the discovery of the absence of an ultimate subject of actions. It is the primary experience of transiency and, consequently, of the pain inherent to all beings. The absence of *ātman* means to the Buddha that there is nothing that could be the ultimate object or primary subject of human experience, nothing to be posited as the ultimate, definitive foundation of everything else. Conversely, we may say that the Buddha's conception amounts to the recognition that there are no privileged beings in this world. There are no substances on one hand and accidents on the other. Whatever comes within our experience is equally transitory, fleeting, and unstable—not only colors and feelings, but also the subject experiencing them.

Let me attempt a brief synthesis of the basic proposition of the *anātma-vāda*. What is methodologically inadmissible is to criticize this doctrine implying its opposite. If we were to imply that substance, that is, the ontological subject, is an indispensable condition for intelligibility, any effort to eliminate it will appear absurd. Moreover, we cannot object to the

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, a summary of scholarly opinion in Pande (1957), pp. 482ff.

<sup>17</sup> See T. R. V. Murti (1950), pp. 10ff.

<sup>18</sup> See the texts we are about to present, showing that the question was very difficult and has been debated from the very beginning.

<sup>19</sup> See the review by Clarke and Burkel (1966), pp. 101–9, to the symposium on "The Self in Eastern and Western Thought." See also Ricoeur (1990), who, without considering the Buddhist viewpoint, returns on the issue.

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Silburn (1955), pp. 185ff., and what already mentioned above.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. a typical text of the MundU III.2.2, in which *krīātman* (the edification, or upbuilding, of the *ātman*) seems to be the expression of perfection, consisting precisely in completing one's *ātman*, even though this *ātman* is identified with the brahman. Of course, the term could also be translated simply as self-possession, without any metaphysical pretensions.

<sup>22</sup> A consequence whose importance is only marginal to this discussion is in itself considerable: to the West (Parmenides' heir in this regard), perfection consists in being complete, "perfect" (*perfectum*), ultimate, rich—so one must wear virtue, knowledge, "perfections," even Christ. By contrast, in the typically Buddhist conception, positivity and the sublime are to be found in simplicity, in simplification, in "stripping." This is a word of caution that appears to be important to those who naively believe in the possibility of a cultural encounter based on a technological vision of the world.

anātmic view of things by stating that if there is "nothing" to change there can be no change, because the Buddhist raises exactly the same objection: if the subject changes, the Buddhist will say, he is no longer subject of change, but change itself; if he does not change, no real change is possible. This will be in fact the final conclusion of the Vedantic *ātma-vāda*. In fact, the Buddhist will say that there is no change but only things that change in comparison to those that precede.

It is not that there is no subject of intelligibility in the Buddhist position. There are as many, in fact, as at any given moment sustain the constant flow of all things. That is, the subject is not subject, is not some substrate that undergoes transformations in its outer shell. This subject, rather, is itself in constant transmigration. Or, better, there is no "itself" to change skins: the "selves" are pure dynamic points. The totality of things is nothing but the manifestation of the cosmic symphony of the whole existent reality, and no substrate is needed to underlie it. All is music, but there is no score. This will become clearer as we examine other basic Buddhist concepts, all of which are closely related:

Greet the Buddha, the Perfect One, best of all teachers. He has proclaimed the principle of (universal) relativity (that all things coexist in mutual relatedness); *nirvāṇa*, the happy cessation of every plurality: the principle that nothing disappears and nothing appears, that nothing ends and nothing remains, that nothing is the same and nothing is different, that nothing is seen neither here nor there.<sup>23</sup>

Summarizing some of the texts, besides those that we shall include presently, it could be said that all is transitory. The Buddhist argument would briefly be as follows: there is change, movement, growth, death, and so on. All of this is evident. What does not exist is an immutable subject of change. First, we have no experience of such subject—this would be in contradiction with the fluid and changeable experience of things that surround us—and if such subject existed, we could not experience it. Second, its existence as immutable subject is logically unsustainable. If we say that such subject is unchangeable, change does not affect it and therefore it is unnecessary to explain change; if we say that it is changeable, it ceases to be the immutable subject of movement. The many other texts we could cite can be reduced to what we have just said, but for the sake of brevity we shall not include them.<sup>24</sup>

### *There Is No Permanent Subject*

"The body (or the form *rūpa*), brethren, is not the *attan* (*ātman*). If body, brethren, were the *attan*, then body would not be involved in sickness, and one could say of body: 'Thus let my body be. Thus let my body not be.' But, brethren, inasmuch as body is not the *attan*, that is why body is involved in sickness, and one cannot say of body: 'Let my body be thus; let my body not be thus.'

"Sense feelings (*vedana*) are not the *attan*. If feeling, brethren, were the *attan*, then feelings would not be involved in sickness, and one could say of feelings: 'Let my feelings be thus; let my feelings not be thus.' Since feelings are not the *attan*, that is why, o monks, feelings are subject to sickness and when we observe feelings, it is not possible to say, 'Let my feeling be thus; let my feeling not be thus.'

<sup>23</sup> Nāgārjuna's introductory prayer (*maṅgalācāraṇam*) at the beginning of his *Kārikā*, as handed down to us by Candrakīrti in *PraPad*, La Vallée Poussin, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., SN III.108ff. (XXII.85); I.54 (XXXV.84); VisMag XVIII.593–96.

"Likewise *perceptions* (*saññā*) are not the *attan*. If the perceptions were the *attan* . . ."<sup>25</sup>

"Mental inclinations (*saṃkhārā*) are not the *attan*. If mental activities were the *attan* . . .

"Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is not the *attan*. If consciousness, brethren, were the *attan* . . .

"Now what think ye, brethren? Is body (or form) permanent or impermanent?"

"Impermanent, Lord."

"And what is impermanent, is that weal or woe?"

"Woe, Lord."

"Then what is impermanent, woeful, unstable by nature? Is it fitting to regard it thus: 'This is mine; I am this; this is my *attan*'?"

"Surely not, Lord."<sup>26</sup>

...

"Therefore, brethren, the well-taught noble disciple feels disgust for body (or form), for feeling, for perception, for mental inclinations, for consciousness. Thus in feeling disgust he is freed from each passion (*virāga*) and, freed from passion, knowledge arises that in such freedom is liberation (*vimokkha*); and being liberated the knowledge (*ñāṇa*) of his liberation also arises. He then understands that each rebirth (*jāti*) has been destroyed; that religious life (*brahmacariya*) has come to an end; that the task is accomplished (*kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ*), and there is [no longer] anything in this world (*itthattāyāti pajānamitī*) (that does not return to him)."<sup>27</sup>

### *The Ātman Cannot Be Defined*

"The *attan*, Ānanda, can be thought of as having sense feelings or as not having sense feelings, or as neither, but as only having sense feelings as a mere property. O Ānanda, if someone affirms that his *attan* is sentient ask him: 'Brother, there are three types of sense feelings (*vedanā*): pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings, and indifferent feelings (*adukham-asukham*). Which of these three feelings do you hold to be the *attan*?' Whenever, Ānanda, a person experiences a pleasant sensation, he does not at the same time experience an unpleasant sensation, nor does he experience an indifferent sensation; only the pleasant sensation does he then feel. Whenever, Ānanda, a person experiences an unpleasant sensation, he does not at the same time experience a pleasant sensation, nor does he experience an indifferent sensation; only the unpleasant sensation does he then feel. Whenever, Ānanda, a person experiences an indifferent sensation, he does not at the same time experience a pleasant sensation, nor does he experience an unpleasant sensation; only the indifferent sensation does he then feel. Moreover, pleasant sensations, Ānanda, are transitory, composed, depend on given conditions (*paṭiccasamuppanna*), are the result of one or more causes, and are also subject to decay, disappearance, evanescence (*virāga-dhamma*), and they end.

"If someone is experiencing a pleasant feeling and he thinks, 'This is my *attan*,' after the end of this same pleasant feeling, he will think, 'My *attan* has passed away.'

<sup>25</sup> The same argument of the preceding paragraphs is repeated.

<sup>26</sup> The text continues weaving the same argument with the other elements: perceptions, mental inclinations, and consciousness.

<sup>27</sup> SN III.66-90.

"Unpleasant feelings, Ānanda, are transitory, composed, depend on given conditions, are the result of one or more causes, and are also subject to decay, disappearance, evanescence, and they end. If someone is experiencing an unpleasant feeling and he thinks, 'This is my *attan*,' after the end of this same unpleasant feeling, he will think, 'My *attan* has passed away.'"

"Neutral feelings, Ānanda, are transitory, composed, depend on given conditions, are the result of one or more causes, and are also subject to decay, disappearance, evanescence, and they end. If someone is experiencing a neutral feeling and he thinks, 'This is my *attan*,' after the end of this same feeling, he will think, 'My *attan* has passed away.'"

"If anyone thinks so it is because he considers his *attan* as something impermanent in this life, a mixture of happiness and joy, with a beginning and an end and, consequently, the proposition 'Sense feelings are my *attan*' is not acceptable.

"If someone, Ānanda, affirms, 'My sense feelings are not my *attan*, my *attan* is not sentient,' ask him, 'If you have no sense feelings (*sabbaso vedayitani natthi*) can you claim—I exist?—"

"Certainly not, Lord."

"If someone, Ānanda, affirms, 'My sense feelings are not my *attan*, yet my *attan* is not devoid of sense feelings; my *attan* feels and owns the senses as a propriety,' ask him, 'If all sense feelings, of any kind, were to completely cease, there would be no longer any sensation; could you then still say—I exist?—"

"Certainly not, Lord."

"When a monk thinks that the *attan* does not belong to these three categories . . . he abstains from such views, he ceases to attach himself to anything in the world and, being free from attachment, he does not fear and, not fearing, he reaches *nibbāna*. He knows then that rebirth is exhausted, that his goal has been reached, that he has accomplished what he had to do and that after this present world there is for him no other (earthly) existence. Now it would be impossible to say of such a monk whose heart has been liberated that he still thinks the saint exists after death, or that the saint does not exist after death, or that the saint both exists and does not exist after death, or that the saint neither exists nor does not exist after death. Since the monk has been freed, his state transcends any expression, communication, and knowledge."<sup>28</sup>

### *The Ātman Is a Mere Name*

Then Milinda the king<sup>29</sup> drew near to where the venerable Nāgasena was; and having drawn near, he greeted the venerable Nāgasena; and having passed the compliments of friendship and civility, he sat down respectfully at his side. And the venerable Nāgasena returned the greeting; by which, verily, he won the heart of king Milinda. And Milinda the king spoke to the venerable Nāgasena as follows:

"How is your Reverence called? What is your name, *bhante* [Lord]?"

"Your majesty, I am called Nāgasena; my fellow-priests, your majesty, address me as Nāgasena: but whether parents give one the name Nāgasena, or Sūrasena, or Virasena, or Sihasena, it is, nevertheless, your majesty, but a way of counting, a term,

<sup>28</sup> DN II.64 ff.

<sup>29</sup> This would, of course, be the Grecian king Menander, who ruled over southern India in the middle of the second century BC. According to legend it was Nāgasena himself who converted him to Buddhism. Although the text is a later one, the essential content very probably antedates the Christian era.

an appellation, a convenient designation, a mere name, Nāgasena, for there is no ego (*napuggalo upalabbhati*) here to be found."<sup>30</sup>

And Milinda the king spoke to the venerable Nāgasena as follows:

"*Bhante* Nāgasena, if there is no ego to be found, who is it then that provides you monks with the monastic needs—robes, food, bedding, and medicine, the relief of the sick? Who is it that makes use of the same? Who is it that keeps the precepts? Who is it that applies himself to meditation? Who follows the Paths, gathers the Fruits, and reaches *nibbāna*? Who is it that destroys life? Who is it that takes what is not given him? Who is it that commits immorality? Who is it that tells lies? Who is it that drinks intoxicating liquor? Who is it that commits the five crimes that determine the following *kamma*? In that case, there is no merit; there is no demerit; there is no one who does or causes to be done good or evil deeds; neither good nor evil deeds can have any fruit or result. *Bhante* Nāgasena, neither is he a murderer who kills a monk, nor can you monks have any teacher, preceptor, or ordination. When you say, "It is my fellow-monks, your majesty, who address me as Nāgasena," what then is this Nāgasena? Pray, *bhante*, perchance the hair of the head is Nāgasena?"

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Is the hair of the body Nāgasena?"

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Are nails Nāgasena?"

...<sup>31</sup>

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Is now, *bhante*, form [*rūpa*] Nāgasena?"

...<sup>32</sup>

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Is sensation Nāgasena?"

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Is perception Nāgasena?"

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Are mental dispositions Nāgasena?"

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Is consciousness Nāgasena?"

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Are, then, *bhante*, form, sense feelings, perception, mental dispositions, and consciousness conjoined Nāgasena?"

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"Is it, then, *bhante*, something besides form, sense feelings, perception, mental dispositions, and consciousness, which is Nāgasena?"

"Nay, verily, your majesty."

"*Bhante*, although I question you very closely, I fail to discover any Nāgasena."

<sup>30</sup> The concept of *puggala* seems to denote the subject of actions, although, as T. W. Rhys Davids notes, it may not as yet have had all of its later connotations. On the origin of the *puggalavada*, see Pande (1957), pp. 490ff.

<sup>31</sup> A dialogue follows of questions about teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, marrow of the bones, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, intestines, mesentery, stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, lymph, saliva, snot, synovial fluids, urine, and the brain.

<sup>32</sup> Follow the questions and answers on sense feelings (*vedana*), perceptions (*saññā*), mental inclinations (*samkhārā*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

Verily, now, *bhante*, Nāgasena is a mere empty sound. What Nāgasena is there here? *Bhante*, you speak a falsehood, a lie: there is no Nāgasena."

Then the venerable Nāgasena spoke to Milinda the king as follows:

"Your majesty, you are a delicate prince, an exceedingly delicate prince; and if, your majesty, you walk in the middle of the day on hot sandy ground, and you tread on rough grit, gravel, and sand, your feet become sore, your body tired, the mind is oppressed, and the body-consciousness suffers. Pray, did you come afoot, or riding?"

"*Bhante*, I do not go afoot: I came in a chariot."

"Your majesty, if you came in a chariot, declare to me the chariot. Pray, your majesty, is the pole the chariot?"

"Nay, verily, *bhante*."

...

"Is it, then, your majesty, something else besides pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, banner-staff, yoke, reins, and goad which is the chariot?"

"Nay, verily, *bhante*."

"Your majesty, although I question you very closely, I fail to discover any chariot. Verily now, your majesty, the word 'chariot' is a mere empty sound. What chariot is there here? Your majesty, you speak a falsehood, a lie; there is no chariot. Your majesty, you are the chief king in all the continent of India; of whom are you afraid that you speak a lie? Listen to me, my lords, ye five hundred Greeks (*yonaka*), and ye eighty thousand priests! Milinda the king here says thus: 'I came in a chariot'; and being requested, 'Your majesty, if you came in a chariot, declare to me the chariot,' he fails to produce any chariot. Is it possible, pray, for me to assent to what he says?"

When he had thus spoken, the five hundred Greeks applauded the venerable Nāgasena and spoke to Milinda the king as follows:

"Now, your majesty, answer, if you can."

Then Milinda the king spoke to the venerable Nāgasena as follows:

"*Bhante* Nāgasena, I speak no lie: the word 'chariot' is but a way of recalling, a term, an appellation, a convenient designation and name for pole, axle, wheels, chariot-body, and banner-staff."

"Thoroughly well, your majesty, you do understand a chariot. In exactly the same way, your majesty, if you think of me, Nāgasena is but a way of recalling, a term, an appellation, a convenient designation, a mere name for the hair of my head, the hair of my body. . . .<sup>33</sup> But in the absolute sense there is no ego here to be found."<sup>34</sup>

### *There Is Continuity in Change Because There Is No Atman*

"Venerable Nāgasena," said the king, "when a man is born does he remain the same or become another?"

"Neither the same nor another."

"Give me an illustration."

"Now what do you think, O king? You were once a baby, a tender thing, and small in size, lying flat on your back. Was that the same as you who are now grown up?"

<sup>33</sup> A dialogue follows concerning the wheels, the body, the banner staff, the yoke, the reins, and the goading stick of the chariot.

<sup>34</sup> The whole series follows ending with consciousness.

<sup>35</sup> Mil II.1.1ff. (1880), pp. 25ff.

"No. That child . . .<sup>36</sup> was one, I am another."

"If you are not the child, it will follow that you have had neither mother nor father, no! nor teacher. You cannot have been taught either learning, or behavior, or wisdom. . . . Is the child who goes to school one, and the young man when he has finished his schooling another? Is it one who commits a crime, another who is punished by having his hands or feet cut off [for his crime]?"

"Certainly not, *bhante*. But what would you say to that?"

The venerable Nāgasena replied, "I am the one who was young . . . and I am also the adult, for it is by means of the continuity of the body [*kaya*] that all the stages of life remain united."

"Give me an illustration."

"Suppose a man, O king, were to light a lamp. Would it burn the night through?"

"Yes, it might do so, *bhante*."

"Now, is it the same flame that burns in the first watch of the night and in the second?"

"No."

"Or the same that burns in the second watch and in the third?"

"No."

"Then is there one lamp in the first watch, and another in the second, and another in the third?"

"No. The light comes from the same lamp all the night through."

"Likewise, O king, is the continuity of the *dhamma* maintained. One comes into being, another passes away; and the continuity does not break. They (the *dhammas*) follow one another without there being a first and a second. None of them can be considered as ultimate consciousness."

"Well put, *bhante* Nāgasena!"<sup>37</sup>

### *There Is No Subject of Transmigration*

The king said, "Where there is no transmigration, Nāgasena, can there be rebirth?"

"Yes, there can."

"But how can that be? Give me an illustration."

"Suppose a man, O king, were to light a lamp from another lamp. Can it be said that the one transmigrates from, or to, the other?"

"Certainly not."

"Likewise, great king, is rebirth without transmigration."

"Give me a further illustration."

"Do you recollect, great king, having learned, when you were a boy, some verse or other from your teacher?"

"Yes, I recollect that."

"Well, then, did that verse transmigrate from your teacher?"

"Certainly not."

"Just so, great king, is rebirth without transmigration."

"Very good, *bhante* Nāgasena!"<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> To avoid lengthening the text we have omitted unnecessary parts already reproduced in full in other contexts.

<sup>37</sup> Mil II.2.1 (Trenckner [1880], p. 40).

<sup>38</sup> Mil III.5.5 (Trenckner [1880], p. 71).



## Nirvāṇa

The core of Buddhism is the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.<sup>39</sup> Without *nirvāṇa* there would be no Buddhism. Yet, since *nirvāṇa* is beyond definition and description alike, the diversity of opinions among the schools of Buddhism runs the whole gamut of possibilities.<sup>40</sup> Small wonder, then, that Western interpretations are equally discordant.<sup>41</sup>

As is well known, the word *nirvāṇa* is absent from the Vedic and Brahmanic literature until the appearance of the Bhagavad Gītā<sup>42</sup> and the Mahābhārata.<sup>43</sup> It is not that the Buddha is inventing the word. He is only giving it a new meaning.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, there are discussions in the Pāli canon on non-Buddhist notions of *nirvāṇa*.<sup>45</sup> The origin of these notions is not yet sufficiently clear for a theoretical explanation.<sup>46</sup> The word "*nirvāṇa*" is often used in the ancient texts to refer to the death of Gautama to his *mahāparinirvāṇa*.

The very etymology of the word is suggestive.<sup>47</sup> The Sanskrit verb *nirvā* means "to be extinguished" or "to be consumed"—never in a transitive mode, but as a fire "goes out" or a flame is exhausted for lack of fuel.<sup>48</sup> Strictly speaking, it is related to the wind (as with the Latin *spiritus* or the Greek *pneuma*).<sup>49</sup> Wind not only extinguishes fire, but tempers heat, so that, etymologically, *nirvāṇa* also means "refreshing"<sup>50</sup> or "pleasant."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Besides the bibliography I list, see also Obermiller (1934/1), pp. 211–57; Glasenapp (1938); E. J. Thomas (1947), pp. 294ff.; Miyamoto (1951), pp. 503–28; Quiles (1963), pp. 263–68; Th. J. J. Altizer (1964), pp. 154ff.

<sup>40</sup> Stcherbatsky (1968), p. 27, offers the following summary. To the primitive Buddhist schools, as well as for Vaiṣṇāsika, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are both real. To the Mādhyamika, *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are both separately unreal; to the Sautrāntika, *saṃsāra* is real and *nirvāṇa* unreal; to the Yogācāra or Vijñānavāda, *saṃsāra* is unreal and *nirvāṇa* real. On the other hand, many authors question this framework: see, for example, Dutt (1930), pp. 154ff.; T. R. V. Murti (1955), pp. 272ff. These writers emphatically maintain that the Buddha asserted the existence of *nirvāṇa* and did not doubt its reality.

<sup>41</sup> To B. Saint-Hilaire, Pischel, and others, "annihilation"; to F. M. Müller "immortality"; to T. W. Rhys Davids, "holiness"; to Coomaraswamy, "transcendent rebirth"; to Keith, "state of absence not equal with nothingness"; to La Vallée Poussin (who maintains that the majority of Buddhist schools hold a non-nihilistic conception of *nirvāṇa*), "perfect agnosticism." See La Vallée Poussin (1925); Heritage; Mus (1935), pp. 201–8; Filliozat §2294–6; Law (1958), pp. 547–58. See also Slater (1951).

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., BG II.72; VI.15.

<sup>43</sup> See, e.g., MbBh XIV.543.

<sup>44</sup> See MN I.4.6.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., DN I.36ff.

<sup>46</sup> See Dahlman (1896); Bareau (1953), pp. 27–62; Tsukamoto (1960).

<sup>47</sup> *Nirvāṇo'vate*, according to the Paṇini grammar, VIII.2.50. *Vata* means "wind" (cf. the Latin *ventus*), and the root *va-* means "to blow." See the examples: *nirvāṇo'gnir vātena*, "fire blown out by the wind," and *nirvāṇaḥ, pradipo vātena*, "lamp blown out by the wind." See more later.

<sup>48</sup> "It is by the ceasing of our fires that peace is reached," says Coomaraswamy (1943), p. 63, in commenting this aspect. See also below.

<sup>49</sup> Suggestive parallels come to mind with the Latin *spiritus* and the Greek πνεῦμα.

<sup>50</sup> See *nirvāṇa* in the Sanskrit dictionary compiled by Monier-Williams (1899).

<sup>51</sup> Would *nirvāṇa* be the wind of the Spirit that blows whither it will, that comes one knows not whence (cf. Jn 3:8), and that consumes creatureliness, realizing the inverse of the work of creation—not of a creation issuing from nothing, however, but a creation that comes from God and that, therefore, returns to God divinized. Coomaraswamy translates *nirvāṇa* literally "expiration," as coming from *nir*, "from" (Latin *ex*) and *vāṇa*, "to exhale, to blow." In the texts of the Gita that I have quoted, he translates "despersion in God" (1943, p. 63). See later, in the same volume, important references in the notes on p. 80. See also Campbell (1949), p. 163.

Some scholars of the Pāli language, however, reject the derivation of the Pāli word *nibbāna* from the Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*. For them *nibbāna* signifies extinction not in the sense of "annihilation," but of "being covered over," from a root meaning "to cover," "to wrap," and even "to suffocate."<sup>52</sup> Only the five aggregates (*khandā*) that compose the being of the individual achieving *nirvāṇa* would be extinguished.<sup>53</sup>

But we must at once add a qualification, lest etymological speculation carry us too far afield. Etymology can furnish only a metaphorical approximation of the sense of the word *nirvāṇa*. Despite the impression we might gather from the various etymological studies of the word, the meaning of *nirvāṇa* is not derived from any concept of extinction at all. *Nirvāṇa* is not the effect of a lack of fuel, and neither is it the cause or effect of anything else. To conceptualize it either as cause or as effect would be to destroy what *nirvāṇa* is meant to be. *Nirvāṇa* neither conditions nor is conditioned. Its transcendence is pure, to the point where even transcendence becomes a misnomer. It would be altogether false to the Buddhist intent and intuition to consider *nirvāṇa* as the goal and end of life. Regarding it as such has vitiated many approaches. *Nirvāṇa* cannot be man's end psychologically, because, in the first place, something that is really "beyond being" cannot in any way be the object of an appetite of any sort. Second, there is no ontological bridge to the other shore. *Nirvāṇa* has no foundation or base to ground the pillars on which such a bridge might rest.

In any case, we can be sure that *nirvāṇa* means the extinction of existence considered as negative and contingent. It will be the "going out" of temporality, the death of all that is mortal—of all, that is, that can (still) be born. If the basis of all human experience, both sentient or intellectual, is pain—if pain is the distinctive mark of existence—the end of man must be the pure negation of negativity itself—the *a-no-nada-miento* (to-no-nothing-ment) of Spanish mysticism, the destruction of the nothing that one "is."<sup>54</sup> Obviously, everything depends on the meaning one attributes to the verb *to be*. For the Buddha, what one *is* "is" certainly not what one believes, thinks, or feels oneself to be, or ever could believe, think, or feel oneself to be. *Nirvāṇa* is the cessation of all *saṃskāra*,<sup>55</sup> the dissolution of all bonds,<sup>56</sup> the extinction of thirst,<sup>57</sup> the annihilation of the three cardinal vices.<sup>58</sup> *Nirvāṇa* belongs to the other side (*para*),<sup>59</sup> the "other shore" of Upanishadic tradition.<sup>60</sup> There are, however, other voices. *Nirvāṇa* is holiness (*arhatva*):

<sup>52</sup> See PED (1966), 362a. The corresponding Sanskrit root would be *vr-*, meaning "to cover." See Buddhaghosa, *VisMag* XVI.507–9.

<sup>53</sup> See Rahula (1963), p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Etymologically this is not a privative *a* but represents the latin particle *ad*. If we consider that the Spanish *nada* (nothing) derives from *nacer* (*res nata*), *anonadamento* (annihilation) suggests *ad-no-nada*, *ad non-natum*, in Sanskrit *ajata* (not being born): to lead to a situation previous to birth, previous to the birth of cosmos and reality. Teresa d'Ávila speaks of *naderia*, and Jorge Manrique (fifteenth century) of *anonadar*. See Corominas and Pascual (1985), pp. 4:201ff.

<sup>55</sup> SN I.136.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., III.73.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., I.39.

<sup>58</sup> Hatred, greed, error: See SN IV.359 (XLII.1.2).

<sup>59</sup> A typical Buddhist expression. Cf. *Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā* (the final part of the so-called Heart Sūtra) [He has gone he has gone he has gone beyond the other shore. Awakening. Glory.]. See Conze's translation (1975). See also AN II.24; Iti 69; SN IV.175.

<sup>60</sup> Cf., e.g., CU VII.26.2; KathU II.1.1; MaitU VI.21, 28, 30; MundU II.2.6; PrasU VI.8.

Once the venerable Sariputta was among the people of Magadha, in the village of *Nalaka*.

Then Jambukhadaka, the Wanderer, went to visit the venerable Sariputta, and as he drew near, greeted him warmly. After exchanging courteous words he sat next to him. After settling in his seat, Jambukhadaka, the Wanderer, asked the venerable Sariputta:

"‘*Nibbāna, nibbāna*’ this is what everybody says, friend Sariputta. Tell me, friend, what is *nibbāna*?"

"The annihilation of lust, the annihilation of hate, the annihilation of error: this, my friend, is what is called *nibbāna*."

"Is there, then, a path, an access to the realization of this *nibbāna*?"

"There is a path, my friend, there is an access."

"And what is this path, what is this access to the realization of this *nibbāna*?"

"It is the Eightfold Path, the access to the realization of *nibbāna*: right vision, right intent, right speech, right behavior, right means of support, right endeavor, right memory, and right concentration. This, friend, is the path, the access to the realization of *nibbāna*."

"Excellent [*bhaddaka*] path, my friend, excellent access to the realization of this *nibbāna*, and also excellent occasion to be diligent, my friend."<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the least inaccurate statement we could make about *nirvāṇa* is that it is *akṛta*—not made, not built, different from what is elaborated (the *saṃskṛta*), constructed and even from what is created. These two words could stand as a symbol of the whole tension between Buddhism and Hinduism. Indeed, together they evidence two tendencies inherent in human nature. One tradition upholds that that which is "perfect" (as the Latin and Greek words—*perfectum* and *τέλειος*—also indicate) is what has been constructed, created, accomplished, built, elaborated, *saṃskṛta*; the other tradition speaks of the "excellent" as of that which is not constructed, not created, not made, not built, not elaborated, *akṛta*. The sociological consequences, even in our day, appear enormous.

If existence is what is, then *nirvāṇa* is nonexistence. If everything has been made, set up, created, and conditioned, then *nirvāṇa* is that which has *not* been made, set up, created, conditioned. We human beings, then, need not be concerned with this. We shall not salvage *nirvāṇa* by defining it. Nor, indeed, could we ever hope to manipulate it in any way, however reverently and respectfully. For the Buddha, true faith is in the transcendent, in the unconditional, in that which in no way "is." Either we claim the existence of a bridge between the absolute and the relative (in a manner of speaking), and then the very bridge contaminates absolute transcendence, for the absolute and the relative would now have something in common, some *quid analogatum*—or else that the abyss is real and unbridgeable, and then there is no way to reach it but through the utter destruction of all paths.<sup>62</sup> There is no argument against the Buddha because no element of the "created" order, by definition, can touch him. He is the Enlightened One, the ever Present One. He knows the nonmade, the noncreated.<sup>63</sup> And he does not communicate the incommunicable. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.<sup>64</sup> The Awakened is silent.

<sup>61</sup> SN IV.251–52 (XXXVIII.1).

<sup>62</sup> An important point for contemporary Christology: things ultimately are not a "creation" of God (Old Testament concept) but rather a "making," a "work" of the *logos*. See Jn 1.3; Heb 1.2, etc., in contrast with Gen 1.1.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Dh XXVI.1 (383), where the same *akataññū* (the nonmade, the noncreated) appears as in VII.8 (p. 97).

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Mt 11:15; 13:19, 43; Mk 4:9, 23; Lk 8:8; 14:35, etc. As you can see, we are not consid-

The basic assumption of this vision is that all things have been made. Accordingly, in order for them to return to their own origin, in order for them to achieve their own real end, there is no other way than for them to be *unmade*—destroyed.<sup>65</sup> In the quieting of all *saṁskaras*, happiness is found.<sup>66</sup> Such quieting represents the return to the original Source, from whence being itself has proceeded, been made (*saṁskṛta*).<sup>67</sup> Only *nirvāṇa* is *asaṁskṛta*.<sup>68</sup>

According to the Upaniṣadic view, on the other hand, creation is conceived as a divine sacrifice, consisting in the dismembering of the body of Prajapati. Here things are not so much a conglomerate of the "made" and "manufactured," but rather a "residue" (*ucchiṣṭa*), a "rest," a "potential," a "possibility," even an "imperfection," a "fall," a "sin," and so forth.<sup>69</sup> For these to reach their proper end, their fullness, the original Source, recovering thus their original integrity, it is also necessary to undo what has been "done," eliminating multiplicity, reuniting it in the primordial unity, Prajapati himself.<sup>70</sup> The notions are different, as are the words used to express them, but from a viewpoint of orthopraxy, of the work of salvation, the process is basically homogeneous: the multiple must be undone in order to reach the original Source (as a Christian interpretation would have it), in order to reconstruct the primordial unity (in Brahmanic terms), or simply in order to undo it, *asaṁskṛta* (according to the Buddhist interpretation). Indeed the efforts of any asceticism are bent on "renunciation," on "undoing" the present state in order to rediscover the original state, whatever that is or has been.<sup>71</sup>

To return to Buddhism, the destruction of creatureliness will mean nothing but the annihilation of all limitation and the recovery of the primal reality. The image is no longer an image when the prototype is attained—and there "is" no prototype, adds the Tathāgata.

Here we encounter a basic ontological problem. In all religions, man seeks a point of contact with the transcendent dimension, but immediately experiences the abyss that separates him from it. In Brahmanism, as in so many other religions, the ontological abyss is bridged through (cosmic) sacrifice. In Christianity it is filled with the figure of Christ as ontological mediator. In both cases there is a bridge to carry creation across, for creation to "transcend" itself and reach the Godhead. Sacrifice, whether that of Prajapati or of the Son of Man, becomes the point of encounter between the relative and the absolute, between the contingent and the transcendent.<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, Christianity does not say anything so very

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ering an isolated passage. These propositions in my opinion confer an unsuspected depth to the light of Buddhism. All things considered, not even the Master of Nazareth spoke clearly of the Father. He simply called Him Father (cf. Jn 17:6) and never actually uttered His name.

<sup>65</sup> This is also the central idea of the asceticism of Saint John of the Cross, for example.

<sup>66</sup> See Dh XXV.9 (368).

<sup>67</sup> This is not the occasion for a Christian hermeneutic of this whole problem—though it might allow us to extract a far deeper, and hitherto unsuspected, meaning—neither to discuss whether "le paradoxe ignoré des gentils" [the undiscovered paradox of the gentiles] (Lubac (1965), pp. 155–77) might be solved in a theology that would take into account Buddhist reflection.

<sup>68</sup> The variety of opinions among the various Buddhist schools concerning *asaṁskṛta* is proverbial and ranges from the recognition of one only in Theravāda, for example, to the nine distinct "unconstructed" according to the Mahāsaṅghika and so forth. A good review of the question appears in Bareau (1951), p. 260. Unquestionably, all schools acknowledge *nirvāṇa* as the *asaṁskṛta* par excellence.

<sup>69</sup> See Panikkar (1983/XXVII), chaps. 2 and 3, for a layout of the problem with appropriate citations.

<sup>70</sup> See Vesci (1985) for the concept of creation through sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇa and its various implications.

<sup>71</sup> For Christian spirituality, see Bouyer (1950). See also the relevant articles in DS and NDS.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Karl Rahner's expression (1962, 5:14–15), formulated in a different context from the Buddhist, but very close to the Buddhist intuition: "Denn was sagt das Christentum eigentlich? Doch nichts anderes als: das Geheimnis bleibt ewig Geheimnis, dieses Geheimnis will sich aber als das

different from Brahmanism—only that, whereas the latter absolutizes the dynamic, cosmic sacrificial action without referring it to a particular figure, Christianity personifies it in the Son of Man. Incarnation takes the place of sacrifice (without being able to prescind from it, however,<sup>73</sup> and the Son must submit to it). Thus, in Christianity, incarnation becomes the bridge by which traditional Christian language can say that God became man so that man might become God.<sup>74</sup> Brahmanism, on the other hand, speaks of the participation to sacrifice as the means of man's divinization.

The Buddha, however, is so conscious of the transcendence of the transcendent—so to speak—that he will not admit the possibility of any bridges: the cosmos has a destiny utterly beyond it. *Sanīkhārā* must altogether disappear into *nirvāṇa*. Then how is the chasm filled, how is the distance covered? According to Buddhism, if any distance, leap, passage, or anything of the kind be admitted, transcendence is cancelled, and salvation becomes impossible. It is as if the force of attraction exerted by creatureliness were so powerful that the moment it touches the other shore, that same other shore is reabsorbed by contingency. *Nirvāṇa* is therefore incommensurable, heterogeneous, and ineffable in every way, even ontologically.

There may be a third possibility, however. And, indeed, not only the Buddhist middle path, but part of the Advaita-vedānta, as well as more than one Western Christian conception, could be set as examples of the attempt to overcome and sublimate the dichotomy (inevitably perceived) between transcendent and immanent, God and the world, the absolute and the relative. This third way will attempt to convey that *nirvāṇa* and *sanīkhārā*, to use a classic terminology, are neither one thing nor two, nor equal, nor distinct. The difference is

Unendliche, Unbegreifliche, als das Unausagbare, Gott genannt, als sich schenkende Nähe in absoluter Selbst-mitteilung dem menschlichen Geist mitten in der Erfahrung seiner endlichen Leere mitteilen" [What, after all, does Christianity say? Really only this: The Mystery remains everlastingly Mystery: yet this Mystery seeks to communicate itself to the human spirit in absolute self-communication, in the midst of the experience of its finite void, as the Infinite, the Incomprehensible, as the Inexpressible called God, as self-bestowing Nearness].

<sup>73</sup> See, e.g., Heb 9:11 ff.

<sup>74</sup> It is significant that this idea, so common and recurrent in the patristic texts—and so fertile for a dialogue between Christianity and other religions—has so often been left in obscurity out of a fear of pantheism. Cf., e.g., "God's Logos has become man that you may understand how man can attain to being God" (Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 1.9). (It is useful to remember that the word θεοποιεῖν "to deify," used for the first time in the Christian tradition by Clement of Alexandria, in classical Greek meant "to manufacture idols," and in some cases "to apotheosize.") The expression "human deification" (θεοποιῶ ἄνθρωπον [*Protrepticus* XI]), which Christian doctrine brings to fullness, is an echo of the gospel phrase "Have I not said, You are Gods" (Jn 10:34; see Psalm 82:6), which Clement perfectly recalls (*Stromata* XIV.146). With St. Irenaeus the thought is all but a leitmotif: "The reason why the Word of God became man, and the Son of God the son of man, lies in the fact that man joined to the Word of God and receiving filiation, attains to being the son of God" (*Adversus Haereses* III.19 [PG 7:939]). Sagnard's translation (1952), based on textual criticism, says, "Pour que l'homme entre en communion avec le Verbe de Dieu" [that man may enter into communion with the Word of God]; cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* Preface (PG 7:1120) as well as 3.18.1 (PG 7:937), etc. St. Gregory the Theologian has a precise and daring line (ὡς γίγνομαι τοσούτον θεός ὅσον ἐκεῖνο ἄνθρωπος) [that I may become God to the extent that He became man] (Gregory of Nazianzen, *Orations theologicae* III.19 [PG 36:100]). Maximus the Confessor will call this formula "the beautiful transposition" (καλὴ ἀποτροπή), that man be deified and that God be humanized (ἁνθρώπησις). Cf., finally: "the Word became man that we might be divinized" (Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi* LIV [PG 25:192]; "God became man that man might become God" (Augustine, *Sermo* 128 [PL 39:1997]; etc. For these and many other texts, see Hausherr (1955), p. 306; Lemarie (1957), pp. 145–60; Bouyer (1960), pp. 334ff.; Gross (1938), *passim*; etc.

in something "accidental," something not "essential" (which a philosophical reflection will then attempt to clarify) that must be "broken," "disclosed," "created," or however one wishes to designate this act by which the human being "leaps to" or "reaches" "being," "arrives," "discovers" the "end," "the truth," "salvation," one's own "destiny," "God," and so forth. A Buddhist will never admit that the distinction in question is between two "aspects" of one "thing"; he will not fall into the trap of a monistic interpretation because he neither seeks an absolutization of the relative (pantheism) nor a relativization of the absolute (nihilism, atheism). Precisely because *nirvāṇa* and *saṃkhārā* are incommensurable, they are not two "things," nor therefore "two" distinct things. The passage from one to another (and there is such a passage) is precisely a praxis, not a theory. But let us not encroach on considerations reserved for the third part of this investigation. I do not intend to critically review the different opinions on the concept of *nirvāṇa*.<sup>75</sup>

I shall, however, permit myself one observation along these lines—one that, it seems to me, may provide a kind of anthropological key to the understanding of at least the reason for such diversity of opinions. To those for whom thinking is not only criterion or judgment but also assertion of reality (that is, those for whom thinking "thinks being," telling us what being is) to posit a "something" that is in no way "thinkable" represents a contradiction, which it is possible to avoid only by asserting that this "something"—in this case, *nirvāṇa*—is a mere illusion. By contrast, those who admit the possibility that thinking may be transcended (not only, obviously, in its concrete exercise, but in its very formal power), that is, that there could be "something" that would not necessarily be "thinkable" at all—these will be inclined to interpret *nirvāṇa* precisely as maximum positivity.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, a mystical temperament will have no difficulty in admitting the thesis of the validity of *nirvāṇa*, whereas a nonmystical temperament will be able to accept only the nihilistic thesis.<sup>77</sup>

Now let us consider some basic texts.

### *Nirvāṇa Is That Which Is*

Only suffering (*dukkha*) exists, not the person who suffers; there is no one who acts, only actions. *Nibbāna* exists, but not the person seeking it; the way (*magga*) exists, but not the follower of the way.<sup>78</sup>

### *Nirvāṇa Is the Extinction of the Phenomenal*

The king said, "Is there such a person as the Buddha, venerable Nāgasena?"

"Yes, sir, there is."

<sup>75</sup> A number of authors have recently constructed a kind of systematic inventory of the various theories of *nirvāṇa*. See, e.g., Pande (1957), pp. 443–40. He comes to the conclusion that the prevailing modern opinion is contrary to both the agnostic and the nihilistic positions (p. 456). Welbon (1966), pp. 300–326, is also inclined to reject the total-nihilism theory (p. 322).

<sup>76</sup> "Das wäre aber eine grosse Häresie, wenn man das *nirvāṇa* mit dem Nichts gleichsetzen wollte; keine Sekte behauptet das" [But it would be a major heresy to wish to identify *nirvāṇa* with nothingness. No sect maintains this] (Regamey [1951], p. 275).

<sup>77</sup> See the series of studies that La Vallée Poussin devoted to *nirvāṇa*: 1917; 1924, p. 25ff.; 1925; 1929; 1932/1, pp. 127ff.; 1932/2, pp. 189ff.; 1937, pp. 189ff. Secherbatsky wrote his 1927 [1968] work after realizing that he could not be satisfied with simply reviewing the work of La Vallée Poussin (1925).

<sup>78</sup> VisMag XVI.513.

"Can he then, Nāgasena, be pointed out as being here or there?"

"The Blessed One, O king, has passed away completely (*parinibbuta*) and has entered a state of *nibbāna* in which nothing remains (*anupādisesāya nibbānadhātuyā*) that could tend toward the formation of another individual. It is not possible to point out the Blessed One as being here or there."

"Give me an illustration."

"Now what do you think, O king? When there is a great body of fire blazing, is it possible to point out any one flame that has gone out (that has returned to its origin) [*atthan-gata*]?<sup>79</sup> Is it possible to say whether it is here or there?"

"No, sir. That flame has ceased, it has vanished."

"Just so, great king, has the Blessed One passed away by that kind of *nibbāna* without remains in which no root is left for the formation of another individual. It is not possible to say that the Blessed One has come to an end (has returned to his origin), and he cannot be pointed out as being here or there. But the body of his doctrine (*dhamma*) can indeed be found, for the doctrine was preached by the Blessed One."<sup>80</sup>

### *Nirvāṇa Is Uncreated*

This verily was said by the Blessed One, by the Sanctified One:

"There is, O monks, something not born, not brought to being, not made, unconditioned. If there were not this something not born, not brought to being, not made, unconditioned, there would be no deliverance from what is born, brought to being, made, and conditioned. Since, indeed, O monks, there is something not born, not brought to existence, not made, and not conditioned, therefore there is deliverance from what is born, brought to being, made, and conditioned."<sup>81</sup>

To this effect spake the Blessed One, and hereupon the following was uttered: "It is not possible to delight in that which is born, which has been brought to existence, originated, created, conditioned, which is unstable, subject to old age and death, a nest of diseases, fragile, dependent on subsistence. There is a way of deliverance from all this, a peaceful state inaccessible to thought [*atakkavacara*], stable, that is not born and not produced, a path that is faultless and griefless, annihilation of the conditions of misery, a happy cessation of all *saṃkhārā* [traces of phenomenonic life]."

Exactly to that effect was it spoken by the Blessed One, so I have heard.<sup>82</sup>

### *Nirvāṇa is the end*

So have I heard. Once the Bhagavant was in the city of Savatthi, in the wood of the prince Jeta, in the park Anāthapiṇḍika. In that occasion the Bhagavant

<sup>79</sup> *Attha* means properly "fireplace," "refuge," and *atthangata* suggests a way toward the place of origins that precedes the phenomenonic existence. *Atthangacchati* is synonymous with "leaving existence," "disappearing," "extinguishing one's self." *Atthangata* (past participle) means "gone back home, to the utter refuge," "disappeared." This word is used to say, "the sun has gone, it has disappeared."

<sup>80</sup> Mīl III.5.10 (1880, p. 73).

<sup>81</sup> Up to here, the text is identical to Ud VIII.3.

<sup>82</sup> Iti 43 (or II.6 according to another numeration).

instructed, exhorted, inspired, and filled with joy the *bhikkhu* (monks) with a conversation on the doctrine concerning *nibbāna*. And those *bhikkhu* heard the doctrine paying attention, absorbing it fully in their minds, concentrated, focused. The Bhagavant, understanding its meaning, uttered in that occasion the following *udāna* (sentence): "There exists, *bhikkhu*, such a state in which there is neither earth, nor sea, nor air; where there is neither rule of infinite space, nor of infinite consciousness and not even of nothingness, there is neither knowing nor unknowing; there is neither this world nor the other, neither sun nor moon. O *bhikkhu*, there is neither going or coming or standing still; nor is there duration or decline or rebirth; Such lack of foundation, such lack of activity cannot be the object of thought. This is the end of suffering [*dukkha*]."<sup>83</sup>

### *There Are Two Types of Nirvāṇa*

This verily was said by the Blessed One, by the Sanctified One, so I have heard.

"The following are, O monks, the two states [*dhātu*] of *nibbāna*."

"What are they?"

"The state of *nibbāna* with remains [*savupādisesa*] and the state of *nibbāna* without remains [*anupādisesa*]. And what, O monks, is the state of *nibbāna* with remains?"

"This is it, O monks: when a monk is sanctified here, when he has destroyed errors [*āsava*] and is satisfied, when he has done that which ought to be done, he has laid aside his burdens, he has reached perfection, he has totally destroyed the fetters of existence and he is liberated by perfect knowledge. He still has his five senses; but although he is not contaminated by them he experiences what is pleasant and unpleasant. His destruction of Passion, of Anger, of Ignorance, is called, O monks, the state of *nibbāna* with remains.

"And what is, O monks, the state of *nibbāna* without remains? This is it, O monks: when a monk is sanctified here, when he has destroyed all errors and is satisfied, when he has done that which ought to be done, he has laid aside his burdens, he has reached perfection, he has totally destroyed the fetters of existence and he is liberated by perfect knowledge. Moreover, all sense feelings, no longer object of pleasure, become colder. This is called, O monks, the state of *nibbāna* without remains. These, O monks, are the two states of *nibbāna*."

This is the sentence uttered by the Blessed One, and therefore it has been said: "these two states of *nibbāna* have been explained by the Blessed One: a state related to this visible world [*idhadiṭṭhadhammika*] and followed by the vanishing remains of the motives of existence; the other related to the beyond [*pāra*], in which the existences have completely ceased. Those who having followed such an unconditioned path [*asariṅkhata*] have reached the liberation of the mind that leads to the cessation of all rebirths, those, having acquired the essence of the doctrine [*dhamma*] and concentrated on extinction, are freed from any form of existence." This is the sentence which I have heard from the Blessed One.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Ud VIII.1.

<sup>84</sup> Iti 44 (or II,7). We follow the 1971 Dragonetti version.



*Nirvāṇa Is beyond Dialectics*<sup>85</sup>

[The opponent questions Nāgārjuna:]

1. If all is void (*śūnya*) and there is neither origin (*udaya*), nor decay (*vyaya*), then how can *nirvāṇa* be reached? Through which abandonment (*prahāṇa*), through which extinction (*nirodha*)?

[Nāgārjuna answers:]

2. If all were not void (*aśūnya*), there would be neither production nor destruction.<sup>86</sup> How then could *nirvāṇa* be reached? Through which abandonment and through which extinction?

3. That which can never be extinguished, nor reached, that is neither annihilation (*ucchinna*) nor perennity (*śaśvata*), that is neither limited nor related to creation, this is called *nirvāṇa*. It escapes all determinations.<sup>87</sup>

4. Indeed, *nirvāṇa* is not strictly in the nature of existence (*bhāva*), for, if it were, there would follow the characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*) of old age and death. Such existence does not exist. Therefore it is not subject to decay and death.<sup>88</sup>

5. If *nirvāṇa* was in the nature of existence, it would belong to the realm of what is produced (*samskṛta*) since there can be no ordinary existence except what is produced.

6. If *nirvāṇa* were strictly in the nature of existence, how could it be unconditioned (*anupādāya*)<sup>89</sup>? For there can be no unconditioned existence.

7. If *nirvāṇa* is not strictly in the nature of existence, is it then a nonexistence (*abhava*)? But where there is no existence, equally so, there can be no nonexistence.

8. If *nirvāṇa* was in the nature of nonexistence, how could it be unconditioned? Indeed, an unconditioned nonexistence has never been known.

9. Therefore, cause and condition (*upādāya*)<sup>90</sup> are distinct (*pratītya*).<sup>91</sup> We call this world phenomenal, but we can also define in such way the *nirvāṇa*, when we consider it without cause and without condition.

10. The Lord has taught that both existence and nonexistence must be refused (*prahāṇa*). Therefore, *nirvāṇa* must not be conceived as either existence or nonexistence.

11. If *nirvāṇa* were both existence and nonexistence, then final liberation (*mokṣa*) would also be both. But that is not conceivable.

12. If *nirvāṇa* were both existence and nonexistence, it could not be unconditioned, for both existence and nonexistence depend on causes and conditions.

<sup>85</sup> The Mādhyamika, the source of the text here cited, cannot claim to relate the very words of the Buddha. Nevertheless I cite it here, for it is perhaps among the clearest of those that maintain the total otherness of *nirvāṇa*.

<sup>86</sup> The idea is clear: If things are *being*, there is no passage from non-being to being, and vice versa. Such passage would mean that things are not, in virtue of the very principle of noncontradiction, inasmuch as being is, and non-being is not. The argument proceeds ad infinitum.

<sup>87</sup> See almost the same words in LS LXXVII (198).

<sup>88</sup> Here the text begins to apply the classic schema of the Mādhyamika with its four dialectical possibilities, based on the celebrated *catuskoṭi* (or tetralemma, see further on) of the Buddha's systematic negative responses to the four types of questions supposed to exhaust an inquiry.

<sup>89</sup> *Anupādāya*, totally free, that does not depend on anything, liberated.

<sup>90</sup> *Upādāya*: the opposite of *Anupādāya*. Here it is referred to as a substrate (*upādāna*).

<sup>91</sup> See the chapter, "*Pratītyasamūtpāda*."

13. How could *nirvāṇa* be both existence and nonexistence? *Nirvāṇa* is not produced (*asamīkṛta*), whereas both existence and nonexistence are produced (*samīkṛtau*).

14. How could *nirvāṇa* be both existence and nonexistence, as light and darkness in the same place? Both things cannot coexist.

15. If we could know the meaning of existence or nonexistence, could we then understand the doctrine of *nirvāṇa* that is neither existence nor nonexistence?

16. If indeed *nirvāṇa* is neither existence nor nonexistence, then by what means could we understand the meaning of existence and nonexistence?

17. It cannot be said that the Blessed One exists after his release (*nirodha*), nor can it be said that He does not exist after *nirodha*, or both, or neither.

18. What is then the Lord during his life? Does he exist or does he not exist? Both or neither? We cannot conceive this.

19. There is no difference (*viśeṣa*) between *nirvāṇa* and *samkhārā*. There is no difference between *samkhārā* and *nirvāṇa*.<sup>92</sup>

20. The limits (*koṭi*) of *nirvāṇa* are the limits of *samkhārā*. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever.

21. It is therefore impossible to solve these notions (theories; *dṛṣṭayaḥ*) on existence beyond *nirvāṇa*, on the destruction of this worlds or its origins.

22. Since all *dharma*<sup>93</sup> are empty, what is finite and what is infinite? What is both finite and infinite? What can the negation of both mean?

23. What is identity and what is diversity? What is eternity and what is noneternity? What is both eternal and noneternal? What can the negation of both mean?

24. Blessedness (*śiva*) consists in cessation (*upaśama*) of all thoughts (*upalambha*), in the reconciliation of plurality (*prapañca*). No doctrine on the *dharma* was ever taught by the Buddha, in any place, ever.<sup>94</sup>

### *There Are Four Kinds of Nirvāṇa*<sup>95</sup>

Then said Mahamati to the Blessed One,

"Pray tell us about *nirvāṇa*."

The Blessed One replied,

"The term *nirvāṇa* is used with many different meanings by different people, but these people may be divided into four groups: There are people who are suffering, or who are afraid of suffering, and who think of *nirvāṇa* as a liberation; there are the philosophers who try to discriminate *nirvāṇa*; there are the class of disciples who think of *nirvāṇa* in relation to themselves; and finally there is the *nirvāṇa* of the Buddhas.

<sup>92</sup> In the text, the word *nirvāṇa* is substituted by the word *nirboda* (destruction), annihilation of the senses, of consciousness, of feelings. It is therefore often used as a synonym for *nirvāṇa*.

<sup>93</sup> *Sarve dharmeṣu*. "Dharma is a technical word for the events or facts that an analysis based on the conventions of Abhidharma reveals as real." See Conze (1975), p. 85.

<sup>94</sup> MK (Nāgārjuna's) XXV.1–24. See Candrakīrti's comment, PraPas, translated and annotated by Stcherbatsky (1968). A good study for our purposes (in which the Buddha's silence is seen to culminate in Nāgārjuna's *śūnya*) is that of Nagao (1955). See also Conze (1975), pp. 77ff.

<sup>95</sup> The original Sanskrit of the LS must belong to the first century of the Christian era, although it may possibly derive from an earlier and much longer text. The first Chinese version dates back to the fifth century. Here I refer in slightly edited form to the text established by Goddard (1956), pp. 351ff., that was based on the English translation from the Chinese by Suzuki (1932). The original text appears exceedingly cryptic and difficult.

"Now, those who are suffering or who fear suffering think of *nirvāṇa* as an escape or as a reward. They imagine that *nirvāṇa* consists in the future annihilation of sense-feelings and of the other mental organs of perception; they are not aware that the universal mind and *nirvāṇa* are one, and that this life-and-death world and *nirvāṇa* cannot be separated. These ignorant ones, instead of meditating on a *nirvāṇa* without representations, talk of different ways of liberation. Being ignorant or not understanding the teachings of the Tathāgatas, they cling to the notion of *nirvāṇa* as if it were something external to the mind, and thus they go on rolling themselves along with the cosmic wheel of life and death.

"As to the *nirvāṇa* discriminated by the philosophers: strictly speaking it does not exist. Some philosophers believe *nirvāṇa* to be found where the mind-system no longer operates due to the cessation of the elements that make up personality and its world; or to be found where there is utter indifference to the objective world and its impermanency. Some conceive *nirvāṇa* to be a state where there is no recollection of the past or present, just as when a lamp is extinguished, or when a seed is burnt, or when a fire goes out owing to the cessation of the fuel or substrata, which is explained by the philosophers as the nonrising-of-discrimination. But this is not *nirvāṇa*, because *nirvāṇa* does not consist in simple annihilation and vacuity. Other philosophers explain *nirvāṇa* as deliverance, as though it was the mere stopping of discrimination, as when the wind stops blowing, or as when one by self-effort gets rid of the dualistic view of knower and known, or gets rid of the notions of permanency and impermanency; or gets rid of the notions of good and evil; or overcomes passion by means of knowledge—to them *nirvāṇa* is deliverance.

"Others, seeing in 'form' the support of suffering, are alarmed by the notion of 'form' and look for happiness in a world of 'no-form.' Some conceive that in consideration of individuality and generality recognizable in all things inner and outer, that there is no destruction and that all beings maintain their being forever and, in this eternity, see *nirvāṇa*. Others see the eternity of things in the conception of *nirvāṇa* as the absorption of the finite-soul in supreme *ātman*; or who see all things as a manifestation of the vital-force of some Supreme Spirit to which all return.

"Yet others (particularly foolishly) declare that there are two primary things, a primary substance and a primary soul, that react differently to each other and thus produce all things from the transformations of qualities; others believe that the world is born of action and interaction and that no other cause is necessary; others think that *Īśvara* is the free creator of all things; clinging to all these foolish notions, [for them] there is no awakening, and they think *nirvāṇa* may consist in the fact that there is no awakening.

"Others imagine that *nirvāṇa* is where self-nature exists in its own right, unhampered by other self-natures, as the variegated feathers of a peacock, or various precious crystals, or the pointedness of a thorn. Some conceive *nirvāṇa* as a sort of non-being, while others conceive that all things and *nirvāṇa* cannot be distinguished from one another.

"Moreover, some philosophers, thinking that time is the creator of all and considering that the emerging of the world depends on time, believe that *nirvāṇa* consists in the recognition of time as *nirvāṇa*. Some think that *nirvāṇa* will appear when the 'twenty-five' truths will be generally accepted, or when the king will observe the six virtues.

"Others, very devout, think that *nirvāṇa* is nothing other than the attainment of paradise.

"None of these views, nor the arguments advanced by the philosophers to uphold their theses, are in accord with logic, neither are they acceptable to the wise. They all conceive *nirvāṇa* dualistically and in some causal connection; by all these discriminations philosophers imagine *nirvāṇa*, but where there is no rising and no disappearing, how can there be discrimination? Each philosopher relying on his own textbook from which he draws his understanding sins against the truth, because truth is not where he imagines it to be. The only result is that it causes his mind to wander and become more confused, as *nirvāṇa* is not to be found by mental searching, and the more his mind becomes confused, the more he confuses other people.

"As to the idea of *nirvāṇa* sustained by disciples and masters who still cling to the notion of one's own self, they seek it by going off by themselves into solitude: their notion of *nirvāṇa* is an eternity of bliss for themselves like the bliss of *samādhi*. They recognize that the world is only a manifestation of mind and that all discriminations are of the mind, and so they forsake social relations and practice various spiritual disciplines and in solitude seek self-realization of Noble Wisdom by self-effort. They follow the stages to the sixth and attain the bliss of *Samādhi*, but as they are still clinging to their self they do not attain the great change and conversion in the deepest seat of consciousness and, therefore, they are not free from the thinking mind and the accumulation of its habit-energy. Clinging to the bliss of *samādhi* they pass into their *nirvāṇa*, but such is not the *nirvāṇa* of the Tathāgatas. They have 'entered the great stream,' but they must return to this world of life and death."

Then said Mahamati to the Blessed One,

"When the *bodhisattvas* offer their accumulated merit for the emancipation of all beings they become spiritually one with all life; they may be purified, but in others there yet remain unexhausted evil and unripe *karma*. Pray tell us, Blessed One, how the *bodhisattvas* are given assurance of *nirvāṇa*? And what is the *nirvāṇa* of the *bodhisattvas*?"

The Blessed One replied,

"Mahamati, this assurance is not an assurance of numbers nor logic; it is not the mind that is to be assured but the heart. The *bodhisattva's* assurance comes with the unfolding insight that follows the clearing of passions, the purification of the obstacles of knowledge, and when total selflessness is clearly perceived and patiently accepted. As the mortal-mind ceases to discriminate, there is no more thirst for life, no more sensual lust, no more thirst for learning, no more thirst for eternal life; with the disappearance of these fourfold thirsts, there is no more accumulation of habit-energy; with no more accumulation of habit-energy the defilements on the face of Universal Mind clear away, and the *bodhisattva* attains self-realization of Noble Wisdom that is the heart's assurance of *nirvāṇa*.

"There are *bodhisattvas* here and in other Buddha-lands who are sincerely devoted to the *bodhisattva's* mission and yet who cannot wholly forget the bliss of the *samādhi* and the peace of *nirvāṇa*—for themselves. The doctrine of *nirvāṇa* in which there is no kind of remaining substrate is revealed according to a hidden meaning through those *bodhisattvas* who still cling to thoughts of *nirvāṇa* for themselves, that they may be inspired to exert themselves in the true *bodhisattva's* mission that consists in the emancipation of all beings. The transfigured Buddhas teach the doctrine of *nirvāṇa* to give encouragement to the timid and selfish. In order to turn their

thoughts away from themselves and to encourage them to a deeper compassion and more earnest zeal for others, the sustaining power of the transfigured Buddhas gives them assurance concerning their future."

"But this is not the Dharmata-Buddha."

"The *dharma* that establishes the Truth of Noble Wisdom belongs to the realm of the Dharmata-Buddha. To the *bodhisattvas* of the seventh and eighth stages, transcendental intelligence is revealed by the Dharmata-Buddha, and the path is pointed out to them that they are to follow. In the perfect self-realization of Noble Wisdom that follows the inconceivable death of the *bodhisattva's* individualized will-control, he no longer lives unto himself, but the life that he lives thereafter is the Tathāgata's universalized life as manifested in its transformations. In this perfect self-realization of Noble Wisdom, the *bodhisattva* realizes that for Buddhas there is no *nirvāṇa*.

"The death of a Buddha, the moment of his great *parinirvāṇa*, is neither destruction nor death, else would there still be birth and continuation. If there were destruction, it would be an effect-producing deed, which it is not. Neither is there a vanishing nor an abandonment, neither is there attainment, nor is there nonattainment; neither is it of one significance nor of no significance, for there is no *nirvāṇa* for the Buddhas.

"The Tathāgata's *nirvāṇa* is where it is recognized that there is nothing more of what is seen of the mind itself; it is where, recognizing the nature of the self-mind, one no longer cherishes the dualisms of discrimination; there is no more thirst nor understanding; there is no more attachment to any external thing. *Nirvāṇa* is where the thinking-mind with all its discriminations, attachments, aversions, and egoism is forever put away; where logical criteria, seen in their ineffectiveness, are no longer seized upon; even the notion of truth is treated with indifference because of the bewilderment it causes; where after eliminating the four propositions there is insight into the abode of Reality. *Nirvāṇa* is where twofold passions have subsided and twofold hindrances have been cleared away and the twofold lacking of self is patiently accepted; it is where the self-realization of Noble Wisdom has been fully attained, reaching the peak of conversion in the deepest seat of consciousness, that is, the *nirvāṇa* of the Tathāgatas.

"You reach *nirvāṇa* when the ascending *bodhisattva* stages are passed one after another; when the sustaining power of the Buddhas upholds the *bodhisattvas* in the bliss of *samadhi*; when compassion for others transcends all thoughts of self when the Tathāgata stage is finally realized.

"*Nirvāṇa* is the realm of Dharmata-Buddha; where the manifestation of Noble Wisdom that is Buddhahood expresses itself in Perfect Love for one and all; it is where the manifestation of Perfect Love that is the state of Tathāgata expresses itself in Noble Wisdom for the enlightenment of all. That, indeed, is *nirvāṇa*.

"There are two classes of those who may not enter the *nirvāṇa* of the Tathāgatas: there are those who have abandoned the *bodhisattva* ideals, saying they are not in conformity with the *sūtra*, the codes of morality, nor even liberation. Then there is a second kind, the true *bodhisattvas* who, on account of their original vows made for the sake of all beings ('so long as they do not attain *nirvāṇa*, I will not attain it myself') voluntarily keep themselves out of *nirvāṇa*. But no beings are left outside by the will of the Tathāgatas; some day each and every one will be influenced by the wisdom and love of the Tathāgatas and by transformation, inasmuch that they will begin to accumulate

merit and ascend the different stages. But, if they only realized it, they are already in *nirvāṇa* for, in Noble Wisdom, all things are in *nirvāṇa* from the beginning."<sup>96</sup>

*Nirvāṇa Has Neither Subject nor Object*<sup>97</sup>

The monk, Chi-tao, a native of Nam-hoi of Kwong-tung, came to the Patriarch for instruction, saying,

"Since I joined the order, I have read the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* for more than ten years, but I have not yet grasped its teaching. Will you please teach me?"

"What part of it do you not understand?" inquired the Patriarch.

"It is this part, Sir: 'All things are impermanent and so they belong to the *dharma* of becoming and ending. When both becoming and ending come to an end, the end of change arises with the bliss of *nirvāṇa*.'"

"What obscurity is there in that?" inquired the Patriarch.

Chi-tao replied,

"All beings have two bodies: the physical body and an 'essence' body. The former is impermanent—it takes a form and it deceases. The latter is permanent, but it knows not and feels not. Now the *Sūtra* says, 'When both becoming and ending come to an end, the end of change arises with the bliss of *nirvāṇa*.' I cannot understand which body ceases to exist and which body enjoys the bliss. It cannot be the physical body that enjoys, because when it dies, the material elements disintegrate and disintegration is suffering, the very opposite of bliss. If it is the 'essence' body that ceases to exist, it would remain in the same 'unfeeling' state as inanimate objects, such as the grass, trees, and stones. Who, then, will be the enjoyer? Moreover the process of becoming and change is unending."

"You are a *bhikṣu* [monk]," said the Patriarch. "How can you adopt the fallacious views of eternalism and nihilism that are held by heretics, and venture to criticize the teaching of the Supreme Vehicle? Your argument implies that apart from the physical body, there is an 'essence' body; and that *nirvāṇa* and the end of change may be sought apart from becoming and ending. Furthermore, from the statement '*Nirvāṇa* is enduring peace,' you infer that there must be somebody to play the part of enjoyer."

"It is exactly these fallacious views that make people crave for sentient existence and worldly pleasure. These people are the victims of ignorance. . . . They erroneously take the state of *nirvāṇa* as another mode of suffering."

"Never for a moment can *nirvāṇa* be considered as either the phenomena of becoming and ending, or as the coming to an end of becoming and ending. *Nirvāṇa* is the perfect manifestation of peace and of the ceasing of change, considering however that at the 'time' of manifestation, there is no such thing as something manifesting itself. It is called 'everlasting' enjoyment because there is no one there enjoying or not enjoying."

<sup>96</sup> LS LXXIV.12 (181–87)—the chapter on *nirvāṇa* according to the text cited by Goddard (1956), pp. 351ff., following Suzuki.

<sup>97</sup> Although we cannot offer an anthology of texts of the innumerable Buddhist schools, I reproduce here the Chinese text of the celebrated Hui-Neng, or Wei-Lang, the sixth Ch'an Patriarch (very probably of the seventh century). When the monk Bodhidharma, originally from the south of India, later considered to be the twenty-eighth patriarch after Śākyamuni, arrived in China, he came to be regarded there as the first of the Chinese patriarchs in the line of Ch'an Buddhism, which was eventually to be very important.

"Listen to these verses:

The Supreme *Mahāparinirvāṇa*  
Is perfect, permanent, calm, radiantly illuminative.  
Common and ignorant people mistakenly call it death,  
While heretics arbitrarily declare it to be annihilation.  
Those who belong to the Small Vehicle and to the Middle Vehicle  
Regard Nirvana as 'non-action.'  
All these are merely intellectual speculations,  
And they form the basis of the sixty-two fallacious views,  
Since they are merely names, invented for the occasion,  
They have nothing to do with Absolute Truth.  
Only those of super-eminent mind  
Can understand thoroughly what *nirvāṇa* is,  
And take an attitude toward it of neither attachment nor indifference.

They know that the five aggregates,  
And the so-called ego arising from the aggregates,  
Together with all external forms and objects,  
And the various phenomena of words and voice,  
Are all equally unreal, like a dream or an illusion.  
They make no discrimination between a sage and an ordinary man,  
Nor do they have any arbitrary concept of *nirvāṇa*.  
They are above 'affirmation' and 'negation';  
They break the barriers between the past, the present and the future.  
They use their sense organs when occasion requires,  
But the concept of 'using' does not arise.  
They may discriminate all sorts of things,  
But the concept of 'discrimination' arises not.  
Even during the cataclysmic fire at the end of a *kalpa*,  
When ocean beds are burnt dry;  
Or during the blowing of catastrophic winds,  
when mountains fall;  
The everlasting bliss of perfect peace and the end  
of change that is *nirvāṇa*  
Remains the same and changes not."

The Patriarch then said to Chi-tao, "I am trying to describe to you something that is intrinsically ineffable, in order to help you to get rid of fallacious views. If you do not interpret my words too literally, you may perhaps catch a glimpse of *nirvāṇa*."<sup>98</sup>

<sup>98</sup> "The Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch," chap. 6, according to the English translation by Wong Mou-Lam in Goddard (1956), pp. 544ff. See also the (very peculiar) translation by P. F. and G. D. Fung (1964). The translation most to be recommended would be that of Wing-Tsit Chan (1963).

### Pratītyasamutpāda

Tradition<sup>99</sup> tells of that memorable date of 531 BC when, with evening drawing nigh, the Buddha seated himself beneath the now celebrated *figus religiosa* in Bodhgaya and conquered the illumination by which he acquired the triple knowledge: of the past (knowing his previous incarnations), of the present (deciphering the mystery of human death and birth), and of the future (realizing that he had destroyed within himself all thirst that would cause subsequent existences).<sup>100</sup> This triple knowledge, and the *rasa* (the gist, the essence) of all illumination generally, can be summed up in the intuition that Śakyamuni had of *pratītyasamutpāda*. *Pratītyasamutpāda* is the central focus of all Buddhism. "Who understands this, understands the *dhamma*, and who understands the *dhamma*, understands this."<sup>101</sup>

Or, according to another text, "whoever sees 'conditioned arising' sees the doctrine, and whoever sees the doctrine sees the Buddha."<sup>102</sup> The figure is also echoed in numerous other passages.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, *pratītyasamutpāda* is the key to a correct interpretation of the fundamental Buddhist intuition.<sup>104</sup> The *bodhisattvas* are the instructors par excellence in *pratītyasamutpāda*.<sup>105</sup>

Understandably, simply in virtue of its importance, this "law" has been subjected to the widest variety of interpretations, according to the different Buddhist schools.<sup>106</sup> The whole Mādhyamika is but a reinterpretation of *pratītyasamutpāda*.<sup>107</sup> There is no less diversity of opinion among modern scholars, as we see from their translations of the formula,<sup>108</sup> which range from the interpretation of a substantialistic causal law to a simple mutual dependency without causality,<sup>109</sup> to a more temperate form of causality.

<sup>99</sup> DN II (*Mahāpadāna Sutta* 14); SN I.6, and the well-known *bokkikathā* in the MhvagVP I.1.1–3; etc. For other passages, see Pande (1957), p. 413.

<sup>100</sup> See any of the numerous biographies of the Buddha, or the voluminous summary by Lamotte (1958), pp. 17ff.

<sup>101</sup> MN I.190–91, repeatedly cited in Buddhist literature. The text reads: *Yo paṭicca-samuppādaṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati, yo dhammaṃ passati so paṭicca-samuppādaṃ passati*.

<sup>102</sup> *Salistamba Sūtra*. See T. R. V. Murti (1955), p. 7; Tola and Dragonetti (1980), p. 44.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. T. R. V. Murti (1955), p. 7.

<sup>104</sup> For a bibliographic initiation, apart from other works separately mentioned, see Oltramare (1909); La Vallée Poussin (1916); Law (1937), pp. 287–92; Barua (1946), pp. 574–89.

<sup>105</sup> *Pratītyasamutpannadharmanirdeśakuśala* [those capable of teaching interdependent production], says Nāgārjuna in his *MhPrajParSas* X.14. See Lamotte (1958), p. 349.

<sup>106</sup> For a brief description, see Pande (1957), pp. 407ff.

<sup>107</sup> See MK V.4.3.

<sup>108</sup> Some examples: Stcherbatsky (1968): "dependently coordinated existence [of the elements]"; Dasgupta (1952–1955): "dependent origination"; Filliozat (1953): "production en conséquence"; Glasenapp (1954): "Kausalnexus des abhängigen Entstehen"; Glasenapp (1957), p. 79: "entstehen in Abhängigkeit"; Silburn (1955): "production en dépendance"; Frauwallner (1953–1956), pp. 1:197ff.: "Lehre von abhängigen Entstehen"; Casey (1960), p. 2: "interdependent coexistence"; Rahula (1963), p. 53: "conditioned genesis"; Dh (1964), p. 98: "generación condicionada"; Streng (1967), p. 58; and passim, "dependent co-origination."

<sup>109</sup> T. W. Rhys Davids and others, including Coomaraswamy, are of the opinion that what we have here is the first formulation of the law of causality. For reasons that, it seems to me, ought to be evident to scholars of Buddhism, this interpretation might well constitute a *metabasis eis allon génos*. In any event, we are certainly not dealing with a substantialistic causality, nor indeed with a "cause" of being, but with a conception essentially distinct from the very idea of causality.



Even the history of the noun is instructive. The diversity in translation and the variety of positions taken toward *pratityasamutpāda* are partly due to the fact that the two Sanskrit words—*hetu* (cause) and *pratīyaya* (in Pāli, *paccaya*; condition)—were translated into Chinese with a single term.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, “cause” and “condition” are often used synonymously, which certainly does not help in clarifying the problem.

Etymologically, the Sanskrit *pratityasamutpāda* seems to indicate a reciprocally conditioned origin in virtue of a (cosmic) functionalism.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, the word indicates a single network of connections among various elements, that is, a universal rather than substantialistic<sup>112</sup> or ontological<sup>113</sup> concatenation.

The basic notion of *pratityasamutpāda* can be summed up as follows: All human conditions (constitutive energies, earthly situations)<sup>114</sup> are impermanent;<sup>115</sup> all that is impermanent (*anicca*) is filled with suffering (*dukkha*); all that is suffering does not have consistency (*attan*); and all that does not have consistency is empty (*suñña*).<sup>116</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Miyamoto (1955).

<sup>111</sup> *Pratītyasamutpāda* derives from *pratītya* and *samutpāda*. *Pratītya* is from *prati* + *i* + *ya*: from a prefix denoting dynamism, movement, proximity, toward, again, similar to, etc. (cf. the Greek πρός); from the root of the word “to go” (*ire*), and from the gerund ending. Its literal meaning would therefore be: “going toward,” “going for the purpose of.” Dasgupta (1952–1955, p. 1:93) translates it as “getting after”; Silburn (1955, p. 197), “allant en fonction de.” *Samutpāda* is, again, a composite word, from *sam* + *ut* + *pāda*—i.e., from a prefix signifying convergence, conjunction, union, intensity, complementarity (cf. the Greek σύν- and the Latin *cum*, *con*-); from the particle *ud*, denoting superiority, preeminence, above, on top of, etc., which, joined with the root *pad*- of the verb for “to go” (“to fall,” “to participate”), means to produce, to originate, to give birth to, to be produced, to emerge, to appear, to become visible, to cause, etc. Its literal meaning would be, then, “convergent production,” “harmonious emerging,” “conditioned generation,” “conjoined appearance,” “mutual origination,” “germinating together,” etc. (Could we say, “epiphany”?) Thus, *pratītyasamutpāda* comes down to something like the joint production that is realized in view of a harmonious origination, the way toward co-emergence, the emergence in virtue of, etc. Let us simply note here the meaning of “walking” and “going,” the meaning of both roots—and the dynamic force of the prefixes. I may venture to describe it as “the joint epiphany of totality,” “the global manifestation of the dynamism of all things,” or simply “the universal concatenation.”

<sup>112</sup> The word used to indicate the system of the various conditionings (sometimes called the theory of the twelve causes) is *nidāna*: connection, link, bond, tie. *Nidāna* comes from *ni* + *dāna*, and *dāna* comes from the root *da*- or *di*-, meaning “to bind.” The word is of ancient Vedic origin (see Silburn [1955], pp. 62ff.). Indeed it is well known that the Buddha bestowed his own characteristic nuance on the concept of *nidāna*, renouncing the Upaniṣadic reliance on the *pratiṣṭha*.

<sup>113</sup> Yamaguchi (1963), p. 7, considers three basic differences between the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* and the “Western concept of causality”: (1) Causality always operates *from* (*ex*), whereas the Buddhist concept operates *by virtue of*. (A child is born *from* a mother; something is on the right *by virtue of* something being on the left, and vice versa.) (2) Causality always precedes its effect, whereas the relationship of *pratītyasamutpāda* is always simultaneous. (3) Cause and effect are irreversible, whereas the Buddhist concatenation is mutual and reciprocal.

<sup>114</sup> *Samkhārā*: *saṃskāra* along with *dharma* is “le mot plus malaisé à traduire” [the most uncomfortable word to translate], says Silburn (1955, p. 171), and goes so far as to assert that “la plupart des erreurs qui ont été commises à l’égard du Bouddhisme proviennent de ce que le verbe *saṃskr* n’a pas été compris dans toute sa portée” [the majority of the errors that have been committed with regard to Buddhism are owing to the fact that the verb *saṃskr* has not been grasped in its broadest implications] (*ibid.*, p. 200).

<sup>115</sup> *Sabbe saṃkhārā aniccā*.

<sup>116</sup> UdVag XIII.5.8.

Or, again, we may cite the simple words that tradition places on the lips of the Buddha's first disciple, who, reaching understanding, suddenly reached *nirvāṇa*: "All that is subject to birth is also destined to disappear."<sup>117</sup> This single sentence contains in itself the whole intuition of the Awakened. Birth is the origin of the chain of ek-sistences.<sup>118</sup>

What the Buddha sees is not so much the celebrated Buddhist impermanence as the radical, constitutive relativity of everything—the universal concatenation of all things and, therefore, their mutual essential relationship, given that they sustain themselves only within the flux of becoming, of *saṃkhārā*. What the Buddha sees is not impermanence. To use language like this is to speak, as it were, from without. What the Buddha's insight sees is the permanence of impermanence, so to speak. That is, he perceives the entire cosmos in its becoming and in the interrelationship of all its parts; he sees the dependence of one thing on another; he discovers the absence of any independence whatsoever. Furthermore, the Buddha observes that if there *were* anything really independent, it would be altogether beyond the grasp of our hand and mind, beyond any sort of learning, possession, or relationship. It would be impossible to speak of it. The intuition of *pratityasamutpāda* is the intuition of pure contingency.<sup>119</sup> We could say: of contingency in its positivity, that is, in its mutual dependency and in its radical interdependence, with no other external support. The Blessed One exempts not even himself, anymore than any other human being—that is, the human subject—from this radical, constitutive conditionality; rather he speaks of the "nothing" that things are and makes no exception for the ego that in substantialistic thinking is the impartial spectator of the perishability of all. In the mind of the Buddha there are no exceptions. He reserves no special "dignity" to the human being.<sup>120</sup> Even the *ātman* is flung into the flux of relative existence, and the Buddha acknowledges that he, too, is immersed in the universal concatenation. There is no room for an answer sufficiently capable of overcoming the transiency and relativity of the question. Therefore, the Tathāgata kept silent.

The contingency of a particular being causes us to seek a different support for it. In other words, if something does not sustain itself, we imagine it is because something else sustains and supports it. Now, if the ultimate support and foundation of all things is found at the end of it all—that is, in some Being beyond all contingency—then the Buddha will ask us if we have a basis for this hypothesis, which can only be the consequence of theoretical reasoning

<sup>117</sup> MhvagVP 1.6.29.

<sup>118</sup> This inevitably brings to mind the passage from the apocryphal Gospel of the Egyptians, as cited by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* III.9.1 [452]: "Unde merito cum de consummatione Logos locutus fuerat, ait Salome: 'quousque morientur homines' . . . quare caute et considerate respondet Dominus: 'Quoadusque pepererint mulieres, hoc est quamdiu operabuntur cupiditates . . . naturalis autem divinae oeconomiae necessitate, mors sequitur generationem: et corporis et animae conjunctionem consequitur eorum dissolutio' [Wherefore with reason, when the Word had spoken of the consummation (of the Ages), Salomé asked, 'Until when will human beings die?' Whereupon carefully and ponderingly the Lord replied, 'As long as you women give birth'—that is, as long as cravings are at work. . . . For, by the natural necessity of the divine economy, death follows generation, and the conjunction of body and soul is followed by their dissolution." To be sure, life and creation in themselves are not evil; it is only a matter of the course of nature, by which birth is invariably followed by death. See the interesting argumentation in the whole chapter, *Stromata* III.9 (452–54), which acquires an altogether new sense if considered in the light of the Buddhist perspective.

<sup>119</sup> "*Paṭiccasamuppāda* is the abstract law of contingency applied to 'things' (*dhamma*)," says Pande (1957), p. 418, quoting Vasubandhu's *AbhK* (1922–1931), p. 2:73.

<sup>120</sup> Consider, by way of contrast, the thinking of a certain traditional Christian spirituality that exalts the dignity of human nature, undermining the value of other things and beings.

or the fruit of direct experience. If it is the consequence of theoretical reasoning, then the transcendence of our hypothetical Being is compromised, for our reason has attained to it. If our hypothesis is the fruit of direct experience, beside the fact that we cannot communicate this experience, we have tainted the transcendence of this foundation. Hence the Buddha is mistrustful of all "pious" reflection on the transience of human things against a background of the consistency and permanence of a God, a Being, or something of the sort. First of all, if this foundation of all things is *seen*, things will no longer be seen as contingent, but as eternal and permanent, as they are seen in their eternal, immutable foundation. Second, if what we see are things, but not their foundation, then we may not say that we experience their contingency directly: rather, it is deduced, in virtue of a mental hypothesis furnishing us with a plausible explanation within the limits of our thought, without any guarantee in direct experience. The Buddha's great intuition consists in "seeing" contingency in itself, aside from any fundament—hence his total vision of the cosmos and his intuition of the universal connection: the concatenation of all beings, forming a single set by their mutual attraction. This is the intuition of the universal connection. But not even this intuition is made absolute, hence the connection with the void (*śūnyatā*).

However, this intuition is beyond the grasp of any reasoning and can be had only in an ineffable, mystical experience. Indeed, the Buddha never pretended his enlightenment was anything else. It was a vision of the entire cosmos in a unitary intuition revealing the concatenation of all with all, the mutual responsibility of all beings, the impermanence of all things, and the nothingness of the cosmos.<sup>121</sup> The Buddha does not see the "beyond." He sees the totality and interdependency of the "over here." Furthermore, the origin of one thing from another is the key to understanding the impression of substantiality that things can give when seen in isolation.<sup>122</sup> We discover that one thing is but the result, the modification, the consequence, the effect, the condition—call it as you wish—of another, and the latter in its turn of yet another, without there being any need of a foundation to support this reaction. When we discover the universal concatenation of all that exists with no way out behind or before (i.e., in time), above or below (i.e., in space), inside or out (i.e., either through immanence or through transcendence); when we are totally surrounded, then we can have the intuition of the radical contingency of all, including the subject of the discovery.

The Buddha's intuition has a genuinely religious aspect. It has a cathartic effect. The discovery of pure contingency is a devastating experience, for it leaves no escape in the form of some "projected" transcendence. It is the acceptance of ontological death, the affirmation of negativity. It is an experience that arises only after having crossed the great and purifying temptation of the loss of hope, as happened to Gautama at Bodhgaya.

But the very fact of having discovered the irremediable contingency, finitude, mortality, and the final "nothingness" of man and of the world around him, and accepting the inexorability of it all, this is salvation—the discovery that leads to the most complete vacuity, that is, to *nirvāṇa*.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>121</sup> A comparative study of the Buddha's experience and that of St. Benedict, who saw the entire world in the form of a single closed globe, would surely provide abundant and promising material for a monograph. Cf. St. Benedict on the *locus classicus*. See Gregory the Great, *Dialogus de vita Benedicti*, book 2. For a theological evaluation, see Stoltz (1936).

<sup>122</sup> It would also be important to compare the key notion of hierarchy in the cosmic vision of the Areopagite (see *De caelestis hierarchia* I.3ff.) with the universal concatenation of Buddhism.

<sup>123</sup> It is meaningful that the CU VII.24,2 rejects the vision that one thing would rest upon another in a mere undifferentiated circularity precisely to avoid the Buddha's conclusion: "I do not speak thus because otherwise one thing would be simply based on another" (*Anyo hy anyasmin pratiṣṭhita iti*).

It is to be hoped that my discussion has rendered the notion of *nirvāṇa* more comprehensible. All schools of Buddhism, logically enough, will defend the thesis that *nirvāṇa* is to be found at the margins, "outside" the universal concatenation, although the expression as such is inexact. We do not mean that "beside" or "above," "underneath" or "beyond" universal contingency there is "something else" that is independent, or a reality called *nirvāṇa* that is untouched by the "dependent origination," and to which contingency returns after being, as it were, delivered from its own finitude. Any attempt to place *nirvāṇa* in a similar relationship with the world would be to deprive it of its constitutive unconditionality.<sup>124</sup> Hence, altogether logically, some schools (especially the Mādhyamika) have stressed that *nirvāṇa* is nothing but *saṃsāra*, except that the latter is seen with a genuine knowledge that has torn away all the veils of ignorance.

By way of summarizing the unitary vision of the Enlightened One, it may be said: reality is one, but can be seen in three modes, each enjoying a different degree of truth:<sup>125</sup>

1. Reality can be seen as a complex of separate substances with an internal hierarchy that may extend all the way to an acceptance of a Supreme Being or God. This the Buddha would qualify as a primitive mentality, since it is, ultimately, a dualistic mentality: any *thing*, by the mere fact of being a substance, would have to be a little god, to be appropriately placed within the hierarchy and finally subjected to a Supreme Being. In the terminology of the Buddha's time this would be the conception of the eternalists, the *śāsvatavāda*.

2. Next in order will be the view of those who, discovering the contingent, changeable, and transitory nature of beings, and frustrated by their incapacity to attain what they unconsciously seek—a *substratum*, a substance—find themselves forced to renounce their quest and declare themselves nihilists, defenders of pure phenomenalism, and the unreality of all. These are the followers of *ucchedavāda*. Their pursuit of an ideal monism necessarily leads to nihilism of pure negation or possibly to agnosticism. It is well known that the Buddha repeated ad nauseam that he did not adhere to either of these doctrines.

3. For the Buddha, *pratityasamutpāda* represents a middle way, the intermediate doctrine (*majjhima dhamma*) that avoids both extremes, being and non-being.

"All is unicity" and "all is multiplicity" are the two extremes to be avoided.<sup>126</sup>

As we know, the problem of the one and the many has occupied the human mind since the dawn of philosophical awareness. Since ancient times, the philosophy of all ages, especially in India, has sought a way out of the basic dilemma between being and non-being. Siddhartha, too, is in the line of the universal philosophical tradition, and his awakening consists precisely in an intuition of the ultimate structure of all things: their constitutive interdependency is a relationship so basic as to proceed from their very existence. Things "are" only to the extent

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Things are reciprocally conditioned, but the total conditioning is endless. *Pratistha*—that on which things are based, are founded, and rest—can find grounding in no other thing, neither in linearity nor in circularity, for this would entail a procession ad infinitum with no possible issue.

<sup>124</sup> See Iti 43 (Talamo, 1962); Ud 1.10; VIII.3.

<sup>125</sup> See in Panikkar (1970/XI) the characterization of the culture of India as a confrontation between a pluralism of truths and a monism of reality. By contrast, Western culture is founded on a pluralism of realities corrected by a monism of truth. This is the sense in which we must understand the assertion of Streng (1967), p. 21, when he says that the expression "ultimate reality" used by Nāgārjuna should be translated as "ultimate truth."

<sup>126</sup> Cf. SN II.48.

that they are produced and conditioned by other things, and nothing more.<sup>127</sup> There is no residue that might escape contingency, no concealed, no permanent nucleus, no "divine" element immune from the universal flux. There are no exceptions to the rule. There are no privileges, for anything or anyone. All reality is only this—hence, no monism nor dualism.

*Nirvāṇa*, therefore, is not and cannot be another reality, as this would destroy the very foundation of Buddhism. Neither can *nirvāṇa* be a true reality (as if there could be a "false reality," as a certain school of Vedānta ends up admitting). Phenomenal reality is perfectly true—it is just that it is transitory, impermanent, and mortal. Strictly speaking, *nirvāṇa* is not. There "is" no *nirvāṇa*.<sup>128</sup> And so when one asks what *nirvāṇa* is, the only answer is silence. And the only possible intelligible translation of this silence is to say that *nirvāṇa* "is" *samkhārā* itself, that is, the existential flux—not a hypothetical, problematic substrate but what is really "perceived" and actually "experienced" as such. From here it is only a short step to the philosophical interpretation of Buddhistic and Vedantic absolutism alike.<sup>129</sup>

Some may say that *pratītyasamutpāda* draws us in a vicious circle. If all depends on everything, if each being depends on the others, and if those depend from these as these from those, on what does everything depend, on what does it rest?

This is the ultimate question to which the Tathāgata does not answer. He does not in fact say that Being is the ultimate foundation, nor that a foundation does not exist. Buddha shows us that we do not know what we are asking, that we ask because of mental laziness in overcoming mere theory and for fear of the praxis: the elimination of suffering.

At this point we could introduce a philosophical reflection that touches the very core of the thought of modernity.<sup>130</sup>

Leibniz says in formulating the so-called principle of sufficient reason: *Nihil est sine ratione seu nullus effectus sine causa* (Nothing is without a reason or no effect without a cause).<sup>131</sup> And he adds that the meaning of this consists in being able to give a principle of reason to every truth. *Quod omnis veritatis redid ratio potest*.<sup>132</sup>

Independently from the formal weakness of the second part of the formulation, the Leibnizian principle has the ambition of being *der Grundsatz alle Grundsätze* (the principle of all principles), as Heidegger shows.<sup>133</sup> The formal weakness consists in the tautology *nullus effectus sine causa*: If something is an "effect" we are already saying it is so because it has a cause—otherwise we would not call it "effect." The real problem is determining whether everything is an effect.

The first part of the formulation tells us that in truth every thing has a reason (and in its broader meaning a cause). Every thing has its reason for being (*nihil sine ratione*), every

<sup>127</sup> Silburn's thesis (1955), pp. 193ff., that the *pratītyasamutpāda* is situated in the same line as sacrifice in the Brāhmaṇa, is worthy of consideration.

<sup>128</sup> As Glasenapp (1954), p. 104, very rightly observes, the denomination of the Absolute as "das ganz Andere" [the utterly other] is more applicable to the Buddhist *nirvāṇa* than to the Christian God. Strictly speaking, however, we should have to say that neither the Christian God nor *nirvāṇa* can be grasped, comprehended, in categories of equality and difference. God is not the "other," but neither is *nirvāṇa*. We have no alternative but ontological silence.

<sup>129</sup> See the celebrated distich, *Na saṃsārasya nirvāṇāt kiñcid asti viśeṣanam* [There is no difference between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*] (MK XXV.19, cited above).

<sup>130</sup> See Heidegger (1971).

<sup>131</sup> Cf. *Monadologie*, chap. 32, for the complete exposition of this principle.

<sup>132</sup> Leibniz (1875–1890), p. 7:309.

<sup>133</sup> Heidegger (1971), p. 21.

thing is related to a reason for its existence. Nothing exists without a reason, which is an explicative principle for the existence of that being.

The difficulty arises when one tries to find an ultimate reason to the very principle of sufficient reason, that is, a reason for reason (a "Grund des Grundes," Heidegger would say). The alternative for the Buddha is clear: either such ultimate reason for reason does not exist, or the question of a reason for reason is to be researched ad infinitum. And herein is the Buddhist subtlety. The Buddha refuses to conform to this frame of reasoning, underlining that refusing the question does not mean that the answer to the question is negative. Translated in contemporary language, this would be like saying: reason can and must seek the reason of all that reason itself may think requiring a reason. However, reason cannot postulate a reason to reason without disqualifying and destroying itself. If, however, reason trusts itself with no other reason than itself, either reason is divinized as a postulate or its being a foundation for other things loses all founding power: better said, such foundation does not exist; what exists is only the radical relativity of all, *pratityasamutpāda*.

One could say that the most "rational" alternative is the divinization of reason, the reason as Reason and Ultimate Cause of everything. The Buddhist tradition replies that such postulate is gratuitous and unnecessary, and that, besides, the need for a concrete basis as foundation for any being does not depend on the principle of sufficient reason but on a new postulate that may identify such principle as Source, Cause, or Origin of all beings, which would be neither empirical nor rational.

We could, nevertheless, find a "reason" for the Buddhist abstentionism. The Buddha, in fact, refrains from answering not because he does not know the answer but because he *knows* the invalidity of the question. He *knows* that you do not know what you are asking. He *knows*, that is, that Being does not know about being Being, that reality is not enslaved to thought and, therefore, does not allow itself to be thought (manipulated) by it; he *knows* that the principle of sufficient reason may be valid for beings but not for Being. Buddha refuses to divinize reason.

Let us now look at some significant texts.

### General Formulation

"I shall teach you the *dharmma*: if one thing exists, another thing comes into existence; from the appearance of one thing there follows the appearance of another; if a certain thing does not exist, another thing cannot come to be; from the cessation of one thing there derives the cessation of another."<sup>134</sup>

### It Is a Primordial Law

"*Paṭitcecasamuppāda* is deep, O Ānanda, and at the same time it bears the aspect of profundity (*gambhīravabhasa*). For not having penetrated this *dharmma* and for not having understood it nor discovered it (*ananubodha*), this generation has remained imprisoned. . . ."<sup>135</sup>

<sup>134</sup> MN II.32 (*Cula Sakuludāyī Sutta*). Cf. practically the same words in SN II.28 as well as in the *Pratityasamutpāda Sutta*. We are dealing with what U, appealing to tradition, calls *idam pratyayatā* in his effort to demythologize *pratityasamutpāda* and transform it into an explanation of all becoming and each existence. See Takeuchi, (1965), pp. 12ff.

<sup>135</sup> DN II.55; SN II.92 (12.60 [*Nidāna Vagga*]).

*All Things Are Mutually Conditioned*

I once heard it said: in that time the Lord was near Sāvathā, in the lawn of Jeta, in the monastery of Anāthapiṇḍika. Once a certain monk named Sati, the son of a fisherman,<sup>136</sup> conceived the pernicious heresy that, as he understood the Lord's teaching, consciousness continued throughout transmigration and there is therefore no difference between consciousness and transmigration. When they heard this several monks went and reasoned with him. . . .

But he would not give in, but held firm to his heresy. . . . So they went to the Lord and put the matter to him, and he sent a monk to fetch Sati. When Sati had come, the Lord asked him if it was true that he held this heresy. . . .

Sati replied that it was so.

"What, then," asked the Lord, "is the nature of consciousness?"

"Lord, it is that which speaks and feels, and experiences the consequences of good and evil deeds."

"Whom do you tell, you foolish fellow, that I have taught such a doctrine? Haven't I said, with many similes, that consciousness is not independent, but comes about through the *paṭicasamuppāda* and can never arise without a cause? You misunderstand and misrepresent me, and so you undermine your own position and gather much demerit. You bring upon yourself harm and sorrow. . . ."

Then the Lord addressed the assembled monks:

"Whatever form of consciousness arises as a consequence [*paṭicca*] of a given condition [*paccaya*] is known by the name of that condition; thus if it arises from the eye and depends on visible forms, it is known as visual consciousness . . . and so if it arises from hearing, it is known as auditive consciousness; if it arises from smell, as olfactive consciousness; if it arises from the sense of taste, it is known as gustative consciousness. If it arises from touch, as tactile consciousness; and if it arises from the mind and depends on *dhamma*, it is known as thought consciousness. It is just like a fire, which you call by the name of the fuel—a wood fire, a fire of sticks, a grass fire, a cowdung fire, a fire of husks, a rubbish fire, and so on.

"Do you agree, monks, that any given organism is a living being?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Do you also agree that living beings depend on food?"

"Yes, Lord."

"And that when the food is cut off, the living being is cut off and dies?"

"Yes, Lord."

"And that any doubt on the phrase 'We are all living beings' would lead to perplexity?"

"Yes, Lord."

"And that any doubt on the phrase 'Living beings depend on food' would lead to perplexity?"

"Yes, Lord."

"And that any doubt on the phrase 'When the food is cut off, living beings are cut off and die' would lead to perplexity?"

"Yes, Lord."

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<sup>136</sup> Basham, in Bary (1958), p. 103, notes that, although Buddhism does not recognize the caste system in theory, one nevertheless discerns a certain caste mentality in passages like this one, in which the monk who has failed to grasp the message of the Buddha is considered as being in a state of inferiority.

"And do you agree that the phrase 'We are all living beings' corresponds to the exact cognition of facts as they are in reality [*yathābhūta*] and that seeing the wisdom of this any doubt must be banished?"

"Yes, Lord."

"And do you agree that the phrase 'Living beings depend on food' corresponds to the exact cognition of facts as they are in reality and that seeing the wisdom of this any doubt must be banished?"

"Yes, Lord."

"And do you agree that the phrase 'When the food is cut off, living beings are cut off and die' corresponds to the exact cognition of facts as they are in reality and that seeing the wisdom of this any doubt must be banished?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Four are the supports arisen for the upkeep of beings and as help for those seeking birth. These supports are, first, the material food (coarse or fine) that sustains the body; second, the contact [*phassa*]; third, knowledge [*manosañcetanā*]; and fourth, consciousness.

"What support [*nidāna*], what origin [*samudaya*], what birth [*jātika*], what development [*upabbava*] has material food? Food has craving [*taṇhā*] as support, craving as origin, craving as birth, and craving as development.

"What support, what origin, what birth, what development has craving? Craving has sense feelings [*vedanā*] as support, as origin, as birth, and as development.

"What support, what origin, what birth, what development have sense feelings? Sense feelings have contact as support, as origin, as birth, and as development.

"What support, what origin, what birth, what development has contact? Contact has the six senses [fields of perception, *āyatana*] as support, as origin, as birth, and as development.

"What support, what origin, what birth, what development have the six senses? The six senses have name and form [*nāma-rūpa*] as support, as origin, as birth, and as development.

"What support, what origin, what birth, what development have name and form? Name and form have consciousness as support, as origin, as birth, and as development.

"What support, what origin, what birth, what development has consciousness? Consciousness has the aggregates [or determinations, *saṃkhārā*] as support, as origin, as birth, and as development.

"What support, what origin, what birth, what development have the aggregates? The aggregates have ignorance [*avijjā*] as support, as origin, as birth, and as development.

"Let us repeat, from ignorance the aggregates, from the aggregates consciousness, from consciousness name and form, from name and form the six mental senses, from the six mental senses contact, from contact sense feelings, from sense feelings craving, from craving being, from being birth, from birth decay, death, grief, lament, unpleasantness, pain, and distress arise. Thus the arising of the whole body [*khanda*] of suffering . . .

"Now if you cling to this pure and healthy view, and you cherish it, treasure it, and make it your own, will you then understand that the parable of the raft,<sup>137</sup> which you use to cross the torrent [of transmigration] but do not keep, is the *dhamma* which I have taught you?"

<sup>137</sup> Cf. MN I.134–35 (*Alagaddūpama Sutta* §22).



"Yes, Lord."

"However, if you only cling to this pure and healthy view, but you do not cherish it, treasure it, and make it your own, if you only use it and are ready to forsake it at any moment will you then understand that the parable of the raft, which you use to cross the torrent [of transmigration] but do not keep, is the *dhamma* which I have taught you?"

"No, Lord..."

"Now, if you know, and see thus, would you have doubts of the present asking yourselves if you really exist or what you are and how and whence your being has come and where it will go?"

"No, Lord."<sup>138</sup>

"Or perchance you say it out of reverence to the Teacher?"

"No, Lord."

"Or maybe you would say, 'Other teachers and masters taught us this'?"

"No, Lord."

"Or would you seek another teacher?"

"No, Lord."

"Or would you see essence in religious rites, ceremonies, and festivals of other recluses and brahmins?"

"No, Lord."

"Isn't it that you by yourself, knowing, seeing and experiencing, say it?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Well done, brethren! I have taught you the doctrine which is immediately beneficial here and now, lasting, open to all, leading to the end and that must be mastered for himself by every intelligent man..."

Thus spoke the Lord. Enchanted by this discourse, the monks were joyful because of the words of the Lord.<sup>139</sup>

### *The Scholastic Inquiry*

As the elements of being originate from mutual dependence in all forms, the sage called these factors "Dependent Origination." The first word of the expression, *paṭicca*, expresses a full state of dependence and inasmuch as all the elements of being are subject to that full state of dependence, the Sage has taught us to avoid such heresies that maintain the persistence of existences, the heresies, namely, of the persistence of existences, that is the heresies maintaining uncaused existences, existences due to a superior power, self-determining existences. For what have these to do with a full state of dependence?

The second word of the expression, *samuppāda*, expresses an origination of the elements of being, and inasmuch as the elements of being originate by means of a full state of dependence, the Sage has taught us how to reject such heresies as the annihilation of existences, nihilism, the inefficacy of *kamma*. Since the elements of being are continually originating by means of a preceding dependence, whence can the annihilation of existence, nihilism, and the inefficacy of karma come?

<sup>138</sup> It is crucial to grasp the difference between this paragraph and the previous: ultimately, even the most correct doctrines of all orthodoxies will be left behind.

<sup>139</sup> MN 1.256ff. (*Mahātanhāsankhaya Sutta* §22) quoted above.

As for the term formed by both together, *paṭiccasamuppada*, it expresses an origination of the elements of being, inasmuch as such and such elements of being come into existence by means of an unbroken series of their complete state of dependence; thus the Sage teaches the truth, or middle path. This totally rejects the heresy that he who experiences the fruit of the deed is the same as the one who performed the deed, and also rejects the converse one that he who experiences the fruit of a deed is different from the one who performed the deed.<sup>140</sup>

### *The Twelve Bonds*

The twelve bonds may be numbered as follows:<sup>141</sup>

1. *Avijjā*. Ignorance. Not to know the Four Noble Truths and the other pillars of the Buddhist conception.<sup>142</sup>

2. *Saṃskhārā*. Karmic formations. Psychic constructions of phenomenal origin.<sup>143</sup>

3. *Viññāṇa*. Consciousness. The set of cognitive acts that have their origin in the activity of the senses.

4. *Nāma-rūpa*. Name and form, that is, corporality or, better still, concrete individuality.

5. *Sadd-āyatana*. The six mental senses,<sup>144</sup> that is, the six bases of cognition, which have their origin in the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind; the six areas from which consciousness arises.<sup>145</sup>

6. *Phassa*. Contact, that is, the (sensorial) connection with the external world, inasmuch as nothing would be set in motion without a stimulus from without.<sup>146</sup>

7. *Vedana*: sense feelings, that is, the individual's reaction to stimulus from the outside world.

8. *Taṇhā*. Thirst: desire to possess, to be satisfied, filled, with special reference to the sexual appetite.

9. *Upādāna*. Attachment. Desire for ownership and appropriation—especially attachment to one's own life.

10. *Bhāva*. Existence. The state of coming into being, the being in the world, or what we might call "re-existence,"<sup>147</sup> the current of successive reincarnation.

<sup>140</sup> VisMag XVII.555.

<sup>141</sup> The following is not the literal translation of a text, but a synthesis of the twelve bonds as customarily presented. It goes without saying that even the descriptions given in the Pāli canon contain important variants. Thus, for example, the *Mabānidāna Sutta* (DN XV.1ff.) has a catalogue of only nine bonds, and there are other texts with six, seven, ten, or eleven. The basic texts are MN III.63; VP I.1; see SN II.1–4 for the etymology of *nidāna*. See also Williams (1974).

<sup>142</sup> On this point and others, see the important aspects highlighted by Lamotte (1958), pp. 39ff.

<sup>143</sup> With characteristic German concision, Glasenapp (1957), p. 79, translates and explains, "Karma-gestaltende Triebkräfte, die das Schicksal der nächsten Existenz bestimmen werden" [Driving forces forming the karma, determining the destiny of the next existence].

<sup>144</sup> *Sadd-āyatana*, the "six dominions" in Dh's translation (1964); "bases," as Lamotte transcribes (1958), pp. 39ff.

<sup>145</sup> The Abhidharma has traditionally doubled these six fields in their subjective and objective aspects: eye/form, ear/sound, nostrils/smell, tongue, taste, body/contact, mind/ideas. Cf. Kashyap (1954), p. 207.

<sup>146</sup> "La prise de contact" [the establishment of contact] in Filliozat's translation (1953), §2284.

<sup>147</sup> Lamotte (1958).

11. *Jati*. Birth. The act of coming into the world and living in space and time.
12. *Jaramarṇa*. Old age and death, that is, the result of birth and existence, in the form of pain and suffering.<sup>148</sup>

### *Staticity Is Impossible*

There are five things that no being in this world can accomplish, neither monk nor brahmin, neither God nor the tempting demon (Māra) nor even Brahṃā. What are these five things? That being subject to aging, one avoids becoming older; that being subject to infirmity, one prevents sickness; that being subject to death, one avoids dying; that being subject to decline, one prevents deterioration; that being subject to disappearing, one prevents disappearance.<sup>149</sup>

There are many other clear and articulated texts, such as, for example, the *Pratītyasamūtpāda Sūtra*,<sup>150</sup> with Vasubandhu's classic commentary, the *Pratītyasamūtpāda Vyākhyā*,<sup>151</sup> or the long commentary known as the *Śālistamba Sūtra*.<sup>152</sup> All of these only confirm what I have been saying in these pages.

### *Avyākṛtavastūni*

According to unanimous Buddhist tradition, there are fourteen propositions to which the Buddha refused to give an answer.<sup>153</sup> They deal altogether with four basic problems: the eternity of the world, its finitude, existence after death, and the identity of soul and body.<sup>154</sup> It is important to observe that the problem of the existence of God is not explicitly mentioned. Indeed, although gods are constantly mentioned in Buddhist writings, they do not correspond to what "God" means in the Abrahamic tradition. Toward this God the Buddha's silence is total, because the space created by the question is not even acknowledged.

This consideration is important in order to give a relevant answer to the question of the Buddha's presumed atheism. Two observations seem to be in order at this point, both of which emerge from the cultural and religious environment in which Siddhartha moves. The first refers to a special characteristic of Indian religious speculation. Here the problem of the world takes precedence over the problem of God. Or better, the problem of the world is formulated using terms and methods that would seem cogent with the problem of God.

<sup>148</sup> It has become classic to divide the twelve conditions into three temporal categories: past (1–2), present (3–10), and future (11–12). "Birth" obviously refers to the future birth of those who have not yet been delivered from the chain of existences.

<sup>149</sup> AN III.60.

<sup>150</sup> German translation and notes in Frauwallner (1956), pp. 39ff. and 409.

<sup>151</sup> See Tucci (1930), pp. 611–23, and the German translation in Frauwallner (1956), pp. 48ff.

<sup>152</sup> See La Vallée Poussin (1916), pp. 68ff.

<sup>153</sup> The main texts are MN I.426–32 (*Cūḷa Malunkya Sutta* §63), which seems to be the first document; I.483–89 (*Aggīvacchagoyya Sutta* §72); SN III (*Vacchagottasāmiyuttam* §33); IV (*Avyakatasāmiyuttam* §44).

<sup>154</sup> Other texts bearing on particular aspects of *avyākṛta* can be found in the following of the DN: *Brahmajāla*, *Mahāli*, *Poṭṭapāda*, *Mahānidāna* (commonly numbered I, VI, IX, XV). See T. R. V. Murti (1955), p. 36, who adds the following citations: MN II.229–38; Mil IV.2–5 (1880, pp. 144ff.); AbhK, Bh appendix (*Pudgala Vinīścaya*); AstPrajPar, 269ff.; DharmSamg 67; MK XXVII and also XXII and XXV.

What seems problematic to classic Indic speculation is not the existence of the Absolute as such, but rather the existence and justification of that which is relative, that is, of the world, in the face of the Absolute itself. Thus we discover the reason why our four basic questions do not regard God, but the world and the human soul. Obviously we are dealing with four religious questions. They could scarcely be described as purely mundane, yet all four are directly concerned with the cosmic dimension. A man of the Indian tradition wonders not about God or the beyond, but about the religious dimension—a dimension at once transcendent and immanent—of cosmic existence, human existence included. He wonders about the invisible dimension of this visible world—a question therefore of pure faith. In short, for India, the theological problem is an anthropological problem.

The second observation is complementary to the peculiar familiarity of the Indic mentality with the realm of the divine. There is an infinitude of gods, *devas*.<sup>155</sup> For the general mentality of the Buddha's time, they constitute a reality more palpable than that of trees that offer men and women shade, and offer the gods and goddesses hospitality. In short, for India the anthropological problem is a theological problem.

Now, if by "God" we mean the mightiest and highest of the *devas*, then the identity of God will merely vary from sect to sect as we follow their disputations. But if by "God" we mean the Absolute, Being, the Supreme Reality, in so doing we abandon a strictly religious ground to venture in the meanderings of philosophico-theological interpretations. Here the Buddha refuses to answer, rejecting even the formulation of such a question, wherever and whenever.

The Buddha—as indeed his disciples, ancient and modern—admit the reality and power of the *devas*.<sup>156</sup> To the explicit question posed by the brahmin Sangarava, "Do the *devas* exist?" the Enlightened One categorically replies, "The *devas* exist! This is a fact that I have acknowledged, and the whole world is in agreement about it."<sup>157</sup>

The religious world of Buddhism, no less than that of other religions, is crowded with beings superior to humans and standing in relationship with them: angels, thrones, *asuras*, *apsaras*, *devas*, and the like.<sup>158</sup>

However, the Enlightened One considers this spirituality, based on a personification of the divine, suitable only for beginners and for secular persons. Those more advanced in the

<sup>155</sup> The threefold etymology of the word *deva* in traditional interpretations is instructive. A first interpretation derives the word from the root *div-*, meaning "shining, flashing," so that in this derivation the Gods are those luminous beings of refulgent splendor and beauty. A second interpretation derives it from another root *div-*, "to play, to amuse oneself," and the Gods would be the beings who play and amuse themselves because they are not subject to the miseries of human life. Finally, a third etymology—much more contrived—relates the word either to the meaning "to divide, to share," or "to give." There is an interesting and illuminating play of words in SB XI 1.6.7 where, playing with the root *div-* ("to shine"), from which *dyu-* ("sky," "day") is derived, and the word *deva*, in the first sense mentioned above, it is said, "From his mouth came the *devas*. As soon as they appeared, they took possession of the sky. . . . And when Prajapati had emitted them, it was as midday for him."

<sup>156</sup> "Es unterliegt m.E. nicht dem mindesten Zweifel, dass der Buddha und alle seine Anhänger an die reale Existenz dieser Gottheiten geglaubt haben" [In my opinion, there is not the slightest doubt that the Buddha and all his disciples believed in the real existence of these divinities], rightly writes Glasenapp (1954).

<sup>157</sup> MN II.212 (*Sangarava Sutta* § 100). It would not be difficult to produce numerous other texts.

<sup>158</sup> It seems to me that a monographic study of the different divinities in the various religions would be important and urgent in confronting the problem of contemporary "atheism." As a source in relation to Hinduism, see Gonda (1957).

way of the spirit no longer lean on the gods.<sup>159</sup> The Tathāgata has "seen" and revealed that the world's fate depends on causes and conditions, so that the wise no longer have any need of turning to the *devas* or to any other divine power.<sup>160</sup>

On these premises, the designation of Buddhism as atheistic would have been incomprehensible in bygone times. Is it not possible, then, that the definition of "atheistic" derives from a particular conception of the divinity—such as that affirmed by the Abrahamic religions or the philosophies of Being? The Buddha does not reject the God of the humble and of the little ones, neither the gods who will crowd Buddhism itself. What Siddhartha rejects is the God of the philosophers and theologians. He simply refuses to let himself be drawn into dialectical secular discussions when dealing with the genuinely transcendent. He rejects the notion that God may be manipulated in any way, even for the purpose of reaching Him as a conclusion (who or what comprehension can "contain" God?).<sup>161</sup>

All of the texts in question are explicit on this point. The Buddha utters neither negation nor affirmation. If he denied one proposition, he would be implicitly affirming its opposite and vice versa. The Buddha simply refuses to allow himself to be drawn into the game of mere dialectics, and therefore unambiguously rejects the affirmation of a doctrine, its negation, and finally both affirmation and negation in all possible combinations<sup>162</sup>—hence his silence. The gentle, smiling Buddha does not refuse to speak, but he surely refuses to answer, as we shall see from our texts.<sup>163</sup> To help us to understand these, it may be useful to formulate the following propositions:

1. The world *is* temporally finite.
2. The world *is not* temporally finite.
3. The world both *is and is not* temporally finite.
4. The world *neither is nor is not* temporally finite.
5. The world *is* spatially finite.
6. The world *is not* spatially finite.
7. The world both *is and is not* spatially finite.
8. The world *neither is nor is not* spatially finite.
9. The Tathāgata *exists* after death.

<sup>159</sup> Cf. MN I.2 (*Mūlapariyaya Sutta* §1); I.329 (*Brahmaninmantanika Sutta* §49).

<sup>160</sup> Cf. MhPrajParSas in the French translation by Lamotte (1944–1949), vol. 4. This is the point certain moderns rely on for their emphasis on Buddhism's "scientific" character.

<sup>161</sup> See Gira (1995) explaining that the title of his article on Amida Buddhism (according to Karl Barth, very close to Christianity) reminds us that the Japanese expression *akunin shoki* means that the "most correct (*sho*) disposition (*ki*) to receive the teaching of the Buddha is the disposition of the evil (*aku*) man (*nin*), that is the man in whom there is no root of goodness. Such is the man that can abandon himself to be held in the compassion of the Buddha" (p. 111).

<sup>162</sup> In order to accurately place the Buddha's negation we should bear in mind the doctrine of *vaiśeṣika*, origin (common to almost all the philosophies of India) of the four classes of *abhava*, the absence or want of being: (1) *pragabhava*, non-being proper to existence, rather like a garment before it is made; (2) *dharma*, subsequent non-being, i.e., being having just ceased to be, like a vessel that has just been broken; (3) *atyantabhava*, or impossibility of being, like the child of a sterile woman; and (4) *anyonyabhava*, or reciprocal negation, such as water and ice (according to the traditional examples).

<sup>163</sup> Although I follow my own interpretation of the celebrated *tetralemma*, it will still be useful to take into account the bibliography on the problem. In addition to works cited above and below, R. H. Robinson (1957); Nakamura (1957); Schayer (1933); Organ (1954); Nagao (1955).

10. The Tathāgata *does not exist* after death.
11. The Tathāgata *exists and does not exist* after death.
12. The Tathāgata *neither exists nor does not exist* after death.
13. The soul *is* identical with the body.
14. The soul *is not* identical with the body.

First, it is necessary to grasp the intelligibility of the propositions.

The purely affirmative propositions (1, 5, 9, 13) are straightforward, like the purely negative ones (2, 6, 10, 14). They are in the form "A *is* B," "A *is not* B," respectively.

The propositions that are simultaneously affirmative and negative—3, 7, 11—do not, or rather, cannot signify a mere contradiction; they cannot, for contradiction is of its very nature nonsignifying. Let us consider, for instance, the third proposition:

"The world *is* [partially (or 'in one respect')] finite and [partially (or 'in another respect')] not finite temporally."

Now the proposition becomes clearer still if we keep in mind that the Buddha's response will not consist of denying such a proposition, but in denying that such a proposition represents his opinion—that is, in saying that such and such a proposition does not contain the truth as the Buddha sees it (without implying, as the Mādhyamika will repeat ad nauseam,<sup>164</sup> that truth will be found in the opposite of the refused proposition.<sup>165</sup>)

As Buddhism experts will certainly remark, the following considerations do not mention the classical theory of the two truths in the Mādhyamika (*paramartha satya* and *samvṛti sata*)—with their many and subtle distinctions—and this to avoid problems of specific interest to Buddhist philosophy (the problematic relationship between the two orders of truth), but rather we have chosen to concentrate on what seems relevant here.<sup>166</sup>

The comprehensibility of the propositions that deny both affirmation and the negation—4, 8, 12—has been the object of lengthy discussions in the schools of Buddhism.<sup>167</sup> These propositions have been interpreted both conjunctively and disjunctively—that is, (1) as a negation of the proposition immediately preceding, or (2) as the separate negation of each of the two parts of the proposition.

The first reading would give, for example,

"The world *is not* finite-and-not-finite" [the world is not simultaneously finite and not finite].

<sup>164</sup> See Robinson (1966). Cf. one of the many texts: "All is truthful, all is false / all is both truthful and false / all is false and also truthful / Such is the authentic character of *dharma*" (trans. Lamotte), *Mahāprajñāpāramitā śāstra* I.16, p. 46. It is understood that if such propositions are arbitrarily interpreted, one can write that "Buddhism includes aspects . . . that irritate human reason." What is disquieting (or, should we say, "meaningful") is that a statement like this was made in the editorial dedicated to "inter-religious dialogue" by a magazine that goes by a Catholic name: *La civiltà cattolica* I (1966), 3494, p. 114.

<sup>165</sup> See the studies by Staal (1960; 1962; see 1975, pp. 33–46). Although the first two do not refer exclusively to Buddhism, they furnish abundant material for reflection. See also Larson (1990), esp. pp. 3ff.

<sup>166</sup> See the text by Nāgārjuna, quoted in the preceding chapter that we implicitly comment on in the following pages.

<sup>167</sup> See Pandeya (1966).

The second would say,

"The world *is not* finite and *is not* not-finite" [the world is not finite and neither it is not finite]."

Considering the progression of the propositions immediately preceding, as well as the reasonableness of meaning, we are inclined to uphold the first interpretation. The second, separate interpretation may be regarded as a simple repetition of the first and second propositions taken together, and thus would not constitute a new proposition.<sup>168</sup> The conjunctive meaning would affirm that neither finitude nor nonfinitude together adequately express the temporal state of the world.

We have before us four types of propositions, then, which exhaust the logical possibilities in relation to any affirmation:

- I. *A is B.*
- II. *A is not B.*
- III. *A is and is not B.*
- IV. *A neither is nor is not B.*

The problem is therefore fourfold:

- a. On one hand, we must demonstrate that a rejection of a proposition of type I does not necessarily imply a proposition of type II.
- b. On the other hand, we should prove that besides the disjunctive I/II, there is room for another disjunctive III/IV.
- c. At this point we would still have to demonstrate that we have covered all the ground—that is, that all possibilities of affirmation and negation are exhausted in these four propositions.
- d. Only then will the tetralemma and the Buddha's attitude become intelligible. His rejection of all four propositions moves beyond ontology and will signify neither the negation nor the destruction of that ontology, but only our liberation from ontology.

Let us proceed gradually.

- a. In virtue of the principle of noncontradiction—a condition essential to our intellect—it would seem at first sight that if we reject a proposition of type I we automatically accept one of type II, at least implicitly. In spite of appearances, however, the Buddha does not yield to this logic. The profound reason for this seems to me to reside not in some misapprehension of the logical laws of thinking on the part of Buddhism, but in refusing to identify thinking and being. Let us not forget that the first formulation of the so-called principle of noncontradiction was not that of Aristotle,<sup>169</sup> but of Parmenides,<sup>170</sup> that the

<sup>168</sup> See the different opinions of T. R. V. Murti (1955) and Pandeya (1966).

<sup>169</sup> ... ἀδυνάτου ὄντος ἅμα εἶναι καὶ μὴ εἶναι [We, however, say that it is impossible for anything simultaneously to be and not to be] (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV.4 [1006a.3–4]).

<sup>170</sup> It is worth quoting this basic text of Greek thought that has been a foundation of Western and especially scientific thinking: χρὴ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἐὸν ἔμμεναι ἔστιν γὰρ εἶναι μὴδὲν δ' οὐκ

principle is indisputably ontological and an immediate consequence of his identification of thinking and being.<sup>171</sup> The principle of noncontradiction, on which the discipline of logic is constructed, especially in the West, can be applied comprehensively to reality if being is equated with thinking.

The Buddha's intuition departs from this model, however, and, bearing in mind the ambiguity of the word "being," uses it as a transitive verb instead of as a substantive. Thus he avoids the dilemma without either falling into a contradiction or surrendering intelligibility.

For, in virtue of the ductility of the verb "to be," "A is not B" can mean either

II,1. A *is* non-B.

or

II,2. A *is-not* B.

In the first case we have a negation of B; in the second, a negation of "is." Now, according to the principle of noncontradiction, only the former of these two propositions contradicts a proposition of type I. The contradictory proposition of "A *is* B"

is

II,1. "A *is* non-B,"

not

II,2. "A *is-not* B."

What we must do is apply to A the opposite attribute to that predicated in the affirmative proposition of type I. In this case, we must not change the predicating formula, by changing the active verb joining subject to predicate. "A *is*" must remain intact in both propositions, for, after all, it is under the same aspect that the predicate B is attributed to A in the proposition of type I, and negated (non-B) in the proposition of type II.

The Buddha gives a subtle reply: "A *is* B" is not my opinion." This, however, is by no means equivalent to an assertion that A *is* non-B. This would be a contradiction. Very simply, he is saying,

"A *is-not* B."

And this is not the opposite of the first proposition. Hence he has not fallen into a contradiction. If M represents proposition I—that is, "A *is* B"—and N represents "my opinion," the Buddha states that

M [A *is* B] is not N [my opinion]

That is:

II,2. A *is-not* B,

---

ἔστιν [It is necessary to affirm and think that what is remains, since being is and non-being is not]. We refer to the most common translations "se debe decir y pensar lo que es: pues es posible ser, mientras (a la) nada no (le) es posible (ser)" (Eggers Lan and Juliá [1986]); "Nötig ist zu sagen und zu denken, dass nur das Seiende ist: denn Sein ist, ein Nichts dagegen ist nicht" (Diels [1951], p. 1:232 [frag. 6]).

<sup>171</sup> The famous fragment 3 (quoted by Plorinus) says, (τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι) ["Thinking and Being are the same thing]. Eggers Lan and Juliá (1986; fr. 935) translates, "Pues (solo) el mismo puede ser y pensarse"; and Diels (1951; fr. 6): "Denn dasselbe ist Denken und Sein."



and that is not in contradiction with

I. *A is B.*

In other words,

I. "*A is B*"

is not compatible, because of contradiction, with

II.1. "*A is non-B.*"

However, it is not incompatible with

II.2. "*A is-not B.*"

Thanks to this distinction, the danger of confusing thinking with calculating becomes evident, or, if you prefer, the danger of confusing the reason of logic with mathematical logic, traditional science with physical and mathematical science, the full awareness of something with its intelligibility. We are aware that we do not understand many things. Such confusion has its roots in the algebrization of thought.

In fact, if in place of the polysemic "*A is B*," we use "*A = B*," the propositions II,1 and II,2 cannot be differentiated.<sup>172</sup>

This second proposition—II,2—is that which leaves the door open to the Buddha's answer.

Let me exemplify this with the first of our fourteen propositions: if the Buddha is *not* of the opinion that,

"The world *is* finite (temporally),"

then, following the principle of noncontradiction, we would conclude that

"The world *is* non-finite (temporally)"

but not necessarily that

"the world *is-not* finite (temporally)."

To deny the proposition

"The world *is-not* finite"

is equivalent to saying that you do not agree with the idea that the world *is-not* finite temporally—in other words, that the finitude of the world does not tell us what the world *is not*. This would be altogether consonant with the Buddha's attitude. Actually, nothing can tell us what the world is, for neither question—that of being or that of non-being—can be applied exhaustively to the world. Ontology is not false; it is simply caught in its own circle: (being) "is" what corresponds to the *logos*. The intuition of the Enlightened One "sees" beyond this. What does he see? Nothing! *Śūnyata*, *nirvāṇa*. We have seen that the rejection of proposition I does not imply the acceptance of proposition II. The Buddha can refuse the second proposition without transgressing the principle of noncontradiction.

<sup>172</sup> A Christologic example would be the proposition "Jesus is Christ, however Christ *is-not* Jesus," something quite different from stating that "Christ is non-Jesus." This could not be formulated algebraically as  $G = C$  implying  $C = G$ .

b. From a rejection of the proposition I, following the principle of noncontradiction, we would agree that

"A is non-B."

However, the proposition

"A is-not B"

remains untouched.

This second proposition, however, is also rejected by the Buddha. We are still faced with a problem because if we reject both propositions,

"A is B"

and

"A is-not B,"

there remains a split between the "is" and the "is-not" that must be filled by affirming and denying the two previous propositions, that is, that the world is finite and that the world is nonfinite (temporally). A new dilemma is then posited as expressed by propositions III and IV.

These are, in fact, the questions next addressed to the Enlightened One: if he is not of the opinion of either proposition I or proposition II, then it would seem that he must necessarily accept either the affirmation or the negation of propositions I and II together. Surely the rejection of proposition I and proposition II must necessarily entail the acceptance of either the affirmation of propositions I and II together, or their denial; in other words, the denial of propositions I and II must necessarily be followed by either proposition III or proposition IV. The reply is once again negative.

The law of the third excluded, whether it is valid or not in formal logic, does not, in fact, apply to propositions that refer to the polysemy of the verb "to be."

There is, therefore, room for a second disjunctive proposition and in this case also the negation of the former alternative—in this case, proposition III—will not necessarily entail the acceptance of proposition IV. For if a proposition of type III is proposed to the Buddha as the truth (e.g., that the world is finite and nonfinite), its acceptance would imply the opinion that the world transcends and comprehends the categories of finitude and nonfinitude.

In fact, a proposition of type III does not say,

"A is B and is non-B,"

but rather,

"A is and is-not B."

This means that the predicate "B" is affirmed and denied in relation to the subject "A" by two different perspectives.

Now, if this proposition is rejected, it does not necessarily follow that proposition IV is accepted. In denying proposition III, in fact, we deny that a predicate "B" might or might not be adequately attributed to a subject "A," but this does not imply that this predicate may not belong in any way to subject "A" (proposition IV). The rejection of proposition III implies that the subject is not exhaustively defined in terms of the contradictory alternatives of a given predicate: it may transcend it, so to speak, ontologically.

"Is" and "is not" (*sadasat*) do not fully express the reality of "A" ("Man is and is not rational"). How could we define exhaustively the world as both finite and nonfinite, inasmuch as neither finitude nor nonfinitude exhaust or adequately express the being of the world.

We still have proposition IV, that is, total negation: A is not B either from the point of view of non-B or of is-not. Of A it cannot be said either that it is or that it is not, or that it is and that it is not both simultaneously and separately. Whereas the first three propositions include an affirmative statement,

A is B,  
A is (it is not B),  
A is (it is and it is not B),

the fourth is a total negation:

A is-not (neither I, nor II, nor III).

We cannot say anything; neither can we say that we cannot say anything. This would be the perfect *koṭi* of the *catuṣkoṭi*, the extreme sum of the four horns of the tetralemma.<sup>173</sup> This would amount to an intellectual nihilism destroying itself in negation, joining a "not" to every "is." It would be, for example, the total skepticism of a Dīrghanakha.

Now the Madhyamika tradition that we are commenting, leaning on the Buddha's silence, refuses this proposition also.

In denying proposition IV the Buddha rejects the idea that the transcendence in question may be considered an ontological transcendence. "A" as a subject does not belong either to the sphere of being or non-being. His position is unequivocal: none of the four alternatives is adequate in expressing his opinion. The Buddha, and all later tradition along with him, held that only the negation of the four alternatives in question opened the way to the real answer—although that answer will not allow itself to be imprisoned in words or propositions. The Buddhist position transcends reason without denying its rights. That is why we shall try to demonstrate that the *catuṣkoṭi* puts reason itself in an aporetic condition that no apagogic reasoning can solve. This is the famous method of the *reductio ad absurdum*, *apagoge*, or *prasanga* (*prasangapadanam*) that Nāgārjuna used so often. And this is our third point.

c. But then have we not initiated a process *ad infinitum*? May we not now go on positing hypothetical propositions V and VI as the negations of propositions III and IV? I think not, for these propositions would be identical with propositions III and IV. In fact, propositions V and VI should consist in the affirmation and negation of III and IV as these have been of I and II.

Formally we would have

V. A is III and IV

and

VI. A is not (III and IV),

that is,

V. A is [(is and is-not B) and (neither is nor is not B)]

<sup>173</sup> *Koṭi* means extreme, the extremities of the crescent or waning moon, something excellent, superior, the apex. . . . *Catur* obviously means four.

and

VI. A is not [(both B and not B) and (neither B and not B)].

What these propositions V and VI affirm and negate, therefore, is not simply something concerning B. They include—through affirmation and negation—the other side of the coin, so to speak, that is, the *is* B and the *is-not* B.

In other words: B has its contradiction in non-B and “is” in “is-not.” No matter how polysemic, the verb “is-not” contradicts “is.” If we want to respect the principle of noncontradiction, which is the fundamental law of human thought, there is no room whatsoever for an apagogic argument.

The proposition we are considering, in fact, may be reduced to

V. A is (*is and is not*) B

VI. A is not (*is and is not*) B,

and mean nothing more respectively than propositions III and IV.<sup>174</sup>

Indeed, the gap that the analogy of being provided between propositions I and II has now been sealed off by III and IV, and no avenue of escape remains since propositions III and IV have their meaning not in themselves but as correctives of I and II.<sup>175</sup>

What I am saying is confirmed by the fact that the list of propositions does not go on to add propositions 15 and 16. Some scholars have been puzzled that propositions 13 and 14 are not complemented by two more hypothetical propositions, by analogy with the first three series of propositions. On the contrary, it seems to me that their traditional omission is highly significant.<sup>176</sup>

In fact, the two sentences

15. “the soul *is* and *is not* identical with the body”

and

16. “the soul *neither is nor is not* identical with the body”

are mutually contradictory—which is not the case with their analogues that predicate not identity but merely a determinate property. In other words, propositions 13 and 14 suffice, between them, to exclude all other possibilities; whereas the previous pairs require a double negation in order to exclude gaps, allowing some other answer to find its way into the conceptual order. If soul is identical with body, the proposition that the soul “is and is not identical” with the body will be meaningless; similarly, if the soul is not identical with the body, the proposition that the soul “is and is not” (or “neither is nor is not”) identical with the body is likewise devoid of meaning. Consequently, hypothetical propositions 15 and 16 would be out of place. The fact that tradition omits them, far from presenting a problem, actually helps shed light on the question. In short, the issue is not epistemological but ontological—and, strictly speaking, this modern distinction between epistemology and ontology is foreign to tradition.

<sup>174</sup> We do not wish to become involved in a heated discussion as to whether or not Buddhist logic, and Mādhyamika in particular, makes use of the law of the third excluded, although I am inclined to support the theory that it does. See R. Robinson (1957); Pandeya (1966); T. R. V. Murti (1955); Yamaguchi (1963).

<sup>175</sup> See a work whose study would shed a great deal of light on the issue (though the author is concerned exclusively with the Western problematic): Morot-Sir (1947), esp. pp. 345ff.

<sup>176</sup> *Caturdaśa avyakṛtavarṇinī* (fourteen ineffable things), tradition says.

What the Buddha is doing, then, is not denying the principles of identity and noncontradiction, but going beyond any affirmation or negation that would rely on them exclusively. We are, in fact, dealing with *avyakṛatavastūni*, with things that are (literally) inseparable, ineffable, inexpressible, or "inexplicable,"<sup>177</sup> in the etymological sense of being so tightly intertwined as to thwart all unraveling.<sup>178</sup> The principles of identity and noncontradiction, properly speaking, are, *primo et per se*, logical principles—principles of thought, raised to the status of ontological principles in virtue of the "dogma" of identity or, at least, of the adequation of being and thinking. The Buddha has "seen further," and it is because it has exhausted all logical possibilities that he can make this leap that frees being from thinking (to use Greek terms). Let us continue.

d. We may consider that *avyakṛatavastūni* are not unknowable truths, but things (*vastūni*) that cannot be explained, separated, or untangled. Why not? Because, we are tempted to say, in following the Buddha (though possibly betraying him, since, in so doing, we are unfaithful to his and our silence), these things are simple, they are primordial, they are transcendent, they are beyond analysis.<sup>179</sup>

If my interpretation is correct, then it seems to me that the intentionality of the *avyakṛta* does not regard the logic of thought, its aim is not softening the principle of noncontradiction or the principle of the third excluded, but rather points to the imperfection, the limitation, the inability to express the real, intrinsic, first in the verb "to be" and then in the very concept of being, inasmuch as, ultimately, being itself belongs to the kingdom of the impermanent, the changeable, the contingent. There are, in fact, propositions that are inexpressible, because ontological comprehension can go no further. Accordingly, although there is no middle term between A and not-A, there is between *is* and *is not*. We consider that here lies the root of more than one misunderstanding in this area—including the issue of so-called Buddhistic atheism. The misunderstanding originates from a reifying logic focused on nothing else than the "object" A, whether identical with itself or not. On the contrary, what we are concerned with here is not the object. It is not as if the Buddha, as defender of a tripartite logic, manages to find middle ground where logic finds none. Our propositions tell us merely that "A is B" does not fully express the identity of A. Therefore, there is room for "A is-not B," and because of this, because "A is-not B," neither can the proposition "A is non-B" fully express the identity of A. Propositions III and IV attempt to convert "being" itself into an object of affirmation and negation, so that Śākyamuni—and his disciples after

<sup>177</sup> From *in-ex-plicare*, something that cannot be explicated, displayed, unfolded—something whose folds cannot be opened.

<sup>178</sup> The root, *kr-*, "to do," "to make," is the basis of the word *a-vy-a-kr-ta*: the initial *a* is privative, so that *vy-akṛta* means "divided, unwound, applied, exposed," hence also—very significantly—transformed, disfigured, changed. The verb *vyakṛ* means precisely "to unmake," and hence "to separate, to divide," and then "to declare, to explain," and finally "to foretell, to prophesy"—undoing the knot of time. Thus *a-vyakṛta* means "the unexplainable."

<sup>179</sup> It would be important to compare the Buddhist *avyakṛta* with the *avyakta* of KathU III.11 (I.3.11); BG VIII.20–23, etc. Here we are dealing with the unmanifested, the undeveloped, the anterior-to-all. See a good commentary in Rawson (1934), pp. 129–43. *Avyakta* derives from *a-vy-akta*, formed by the privative *a-*, the particle *vi-*, and the root *anj-* that means "to anoint." Hence *vyakta* means "adorned, beautiful, beautified"; but at once, as early as the RV, it assumes the meaning of "apparent, visible, manifest." To be sure, there is another root, *vi-* or *vya-*, which means "to cover"; here *avyakta* would mean that which is discovered—"the manifest." The extent of the ties between the Un-manifested of the Upaniṣads and the Inexplicable of the Buddha would make an interesting theme for research.

him—are obliged to reject that one or the other or both of these two propositions may represent the truth. Only by transcending *logos* can we transcend *on* (being). The weakness lies not with B, or not-B; contingency lies not with knowledge or evaluation but with being itself. The weakness, therefore, lies with A itself, with the subject itself, which neither is nor is-not, and can therefore scarcely be identical to itself. Ultimately, the Buddhistic intuition is simple, and everything coherently falls together: *anatma-vada* impermanence, transitoriness, universal concatenation and dependency, inexpressibility, *nirvāṇa*, and silence.

A is not A because the being of A does not fully express A. A (inasmuch as it is) is A [tautology], but A is not "identical" with A.

All we have been saying can be very briefly summed up by repeating what we have said initially: we cannot consider Being as we consider things. When we say "A," we imply "being A," that is, "A" is equal with "A is." We cannot therefore think in terms of "A is not" or treat it like a neutral algorithm. And here we repeat what I have tried so often to submit: Being does not follow Thinking. I do not say that the laws of Being are not the laws of thinking simply because Being has no laws. Being is Grace, in the deepest philosophical (and, for a certain tradition, theological) sense.

This last sentence emphasizes the comprehensibility of the Buddha's and the Buddhist refusal to submit to the laws of thought concerning the existential issues of human life and the *unicum necessarium* for man.

On the basis of the above statement, the Buddha's silence may appear to be comprehensible. He refrains from entering in the merely dialectical game on ultimate issues and keeps silence. But the Awakened does not merely keep silence but explains that all possible logical solutions do not correspond to his opinion. He does formulate his refusal.

What, then, is his opinion? Or, better said, what is the basic intuition that enables him to disallow apparently rational opinions? The Buddhist position is, in this respect, truly epochal. Its challenge goes from the aforementioned Parmenides to the last and most powerful of schools: modern science. And here we refer to all we have said since the beginning concerning interculturality and the unique configuration of our times. We shall simply mention the Western idol par excellence, although its temples have already spread on all the surface, the depths, and the atmosphere of the earth: techno-science.

In fact, the literally marvelous results of techno-science have led us to believe that the laws of thinking are revelations of the laws of Being, as if Being could be submitted to laws without ceasing to be Being, becoming thus Idea and Thought. Postulating that Being may have laws already represents the assimilation of Being by Thought and also postulates a law above Being to which Being itself must submit—Having-to-Be above Being.

Real life—that is, Reality—follows different paths, or rather invents them singularly. Let us concisely repeat this, first in a philosophical and then in a historical and religious form.

The ontic dimension is not ontological, and the ontological dimension is not merely epistemological. The rationality of man is not equal to his being. The mind has vetoing power on human actions, but it is neither its driving engine nor its guide. Thinking discovers and also reveals to us Being, but it does not reveal all of it, nor does it show us more than what Being is in that particular moment and how it generally behaves. Heisenberg's principle of indetermination could be the best metaphor to help us understand that uncertainty is not only epistemic or related to the position of the observer, but that it is naturally ontological. We have, however, written and spoken on this elsewhere.

The historic and religious dimension brings out a puzzling parallelism with another man, also of kingly descent, who lived half a millennium later, but who was contemporary of many of the texts that we shall quote presently: Jesus of Nazareth, of the House of David.

He also broke the holy law of his people and, in spite of the efforts of Matthew to present his message as the fullness of Israel, many good rabbis of his time, including Paul, also a rabbi, knew better, realizing that someone who dared to say (albeit in a less philosophical form) that Being has no law—to the point that the Sabbath is made for man, who is its lord<sup>180</sup>—could not be a son of Moses. Buddha and Jesus are transgressors of the law, but anomie is not equal to anarchy. That is why both insisted on emptiness, which is purity of heart . . . and both were divinized.<sup>181</sup>

This very brief excursus on this theme will have to suffice.

And now let us consider a few texts.

### *One Thing Is Needful*

Maluṅkyaputta, the disciple of the *sūtra* bearing his name, once asked the Buddha the celebrated questions on the nature of the world and of existence, at the same time begging him, if he had no answer, to tell him so simply and honestly, and not to evade the issue. And the Buddha replied:

"Pray, Maluṅkyaputta, did I ever say to you, 'Come, Maluṅkyaputta, be my disciple and I will elucidate to you if the world is eternal [*sassat*], or if the world is not eternal [*asassata*], if the world is finite [*antavat*] or nonfinite [*anantavat*], if the soul [*jīva*]<sup>182</sup> and the body [*sarira*] are identical or not, if the Tathāgata exists [*hoti*] after death, or if he both exists and does not exist, or if he neither exists nor does not exist?"

"Nay, verily, Reverend Sir."

"Or maybe you came to me saying, 'Reverend Sir, I will be your disciple, on condition that you elucidate to me if the world is eternal or if the world is not eternal, if the world is finite or nonfinite, if the soul and the body are identical or not, if the Tathāgata exists after death, or if he both exists and does not exist, or if he neither exists nor does not exist.'"

"Nay, verily, Reverend Sir."

"So you acknowledge, Maluṅkyaputta, that I have not said to you . . . [anything of the sort, nor you to me]. That being the case, foolish man, whom are you reproving?"

It is here that the Buddha spoke the parable about the man wounded by an arrow.

"Accordingly, Maluṅkyaputta, bear always in mind what it is that I have not elucidated, and what it is that I have elucidated. . . . And what have I elucidated? Suffering, I elucidated; the origin of suffering have I elucidated; the cessation of suffering have I elucidated; and the path leading to the cessation of suffering have I elucidated. And why, Maluṅkyaputta, have I elucidated this? Because this does profit, it has to do with the fundamentals of wisdom, and tends to detachment, equanimity, quietness, peace, supreme knowledge, and *nibbāna*. Accordingly, Maluṅkyaputta bear always in mind what it is that I have not elucidated, and what it is that I have elucidated."

Thus spake The Blessed One; and, delighted, the venerable Maluṅkyaputta applauded the speech of The Blessed One.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>180</sup> See Segundo (1994), to quote only a recent Spanish work, enlightening and original, with Gauraudy's annexes.

<sup>181</sup> See the beginning of Nāgārjuna's *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* in Lamotte (1958), pp. 1:5ff.

<sup>182</sup> We stress here that *jīva* rather than *ātman* is mentioned.

<sup>183</sup> MN 1.426 (*Cūḷa Maluṅkyā Sutta* §63).

*True Freedom Is Ineffable*

Thus have I heard.

On a certain occasion The Blessed One was dwelling at Savatthī, in the wood of the monastery of Anathapiṇḍika. Then drew near Vacchagotta, the wandering ascetic, to where The Blessed One was; and having drawn near, he greeted The Blessed One; and having passed the compliments of friendship and civility, he sat down respectfully at one side. And seated respectfully at one side, he spoke as follows:

"How is it, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that 'the world is eternal, and that this alone is true, and every other opinion false'?"

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.'"

"But how is it, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that 'the world is not eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false'?"

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the world is not eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false.'"

"How is it, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that 'the world is finite'?"<sup>184</sup>

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the world is finite.'"

"How then, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that 'the world is nonfinite'?"

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the world is nonfinite.'"

"How is it, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that the soul and the body are identical?"

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the soul and the body are identical.'"

"How then, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that 'the soul and the body are not identical'?"

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the soul and the body are not identical.'"

"How is it, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that 'the Tathāgata (the Buddha, the Perfect Man)<sup>185</sup> exists after death'?"

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the Tathāgata exists after death. . . .'"

"How then, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that 'the Tathāgata does not exist after death'?"

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the Tathāgata does not exist after death. . . .'"

"How is it, Gautama? Does Gautama hold that 'the Tathāgata exists and does not exist after death. . . .'"

"Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that 'the Tathāgata exists and does not exist after death. . . .'"

"How is it, Gautama, that when you are asked, 'Does the monk Gautama hold that the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false,' you reply, 'Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that the world is eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false'?"

"But how is it, Gautama, that when you are asked, 'Does the monk Gautama hold that the world is not eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false?' you reply, 'Nay, Vaccha. I do not hold that the world is not eternal, and that this view alone is true, and every other false'?"

He continues in this fashion with all the questions of the dialogue.

"What objection does Gautama perceive to these theories, so that he has not adopted any one of them?"

<sup>184</sup> From here on, I replace refrains with ellipses.

<sup>185</sup> See *Uttama purismo parama purismo*, SN IV (Treckner, p. 380).



"Vaccha, the theory that the world is eternal is a false opinion, a jungle, a wilderness, a puppet-show, a writhing, and a fetter, and is coupled with misery, ruin, despair, and agony, and does not tend to aversion [to the world], absence of passion, cessation, quietness, supreme knowledge, supreme enlightenment, and extinction [*nibbāna*].

"The theory that the world is not eternal is a false opinion. . . ."

He follows this argumentation with all propositions.

"This, O Vaccha, is the objection I perceive to these theories, so that I have not adopted any one of them."

"But has Gautama still any false opinion of his own?"

"The Tathāgata, O Vaccha, is free from all theories; but this, Vaccha, does the Tathāgata know—the nature of form, and how form arises [*samudaya*], and how form perishes [*attha-gamo*]; the nature of sensation, and how sensation arises, and how sensation perishes; the nature of perception, and how perception arises, and how perception perishes; the nature of aggregates, and how aggregates arise, and how aggregates perish; the nature of consciousness, and how consciousness arises, and how consciousness perishes. Therefore say I that the Tathāgata has attained deliverance and is permanently free (liberated) from attachment, inasmuch as all imaginings, or agitations, or proud thoughts concerning an ego or anything pertaining to an ego, have perished, have faded away, have ceased, have been given up and relinquished."

"But, Gautama, where is the monk reborn who has attained to this deliverance for his mind?"

"Vaccha, to say that he is 'reborn' would not fit the case."

"Then Gautama, he is not reborn."

"Vaccha, to say that he is not reborn would not fit the case."

"Then, Gautama, he is both reborn and is not reborn."

"Vaccha, to say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case."

"Then, Gautama, he is neither reborn nor not reborn."

"Vaccha, to say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case. . . ."

He continues as before along these same lines. . . .

"Gautama, I am at a loss what to think in this matter, and I have become greatly confused, and the faith in Gautama inspired by a former conversation has now disappeared."

"Enough, O Vaccha! Be not at a loss what to think in this matter, and be not greatly confused. Profound, O Vaccha, is this doctrine, recondite, and difficult of comprehension, good, excellent, and not to be reached by mere reasoning, subtle, and intelligible only to the wise; and it is a hard doctrine for you to learn, who belong to another sect, to another faith, to another persuasion, to another discipline, and sit at the feet of another teacher. Therefore, Vaccha, I will now question you, and you may answer as seems best to you. What think you, Vaccha? Suppose a fire were to burn in front of you. Would you be aware that the fire was burning in front of you?"

"Gautama, if a fire were to burn in front of me, I should be aware that a fire was burning in front of me."

"But suppose, Vaccha, someone were to ask you, 'On what does this fire that is burning in front of you depend?' what would you answer, Vaccha?"

"Gautama, if someone were to ask me, 'On what does this fire that is burning in front of you depend?' I would answer, Gautama, 'It is on fuel of grass and wood that this fire that is burning in front of me depends.'"

"But, Vaccha, if the fire in front of you were to become extinct, would you be aware that the fire in front of you had become extinct?"

"Gautama, if the fire in front of me were to become extinct, I should be aware that the fire in front of me had become extinct."

"But, Vaccha, if someone were to ask you, 'In which direction has that fire gone—East, or West, or North, or South?' what would you say, O Vaccha?"

The question would not fit the case, Gautama. For the fire that depended on fuel of grass and wood, when that fuel has all gone, and it can get no other, being thus without nutriment, is said to be extinct."

"In exactly the same way, Vaccha, all form by which one could predicate the existence of the Tathāgata, all that form has been abandoned, uprooted, pulled out of the ground, become nonexistent [*an-abhava-katam*] and yielded to the law of not producing any future. The Tathāgata, O Vaccha, who has been released from what is called 'body' [form], is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the mighty ocean. To say that he is reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is both reborn and not reborn would not fit the case. To say that he is neither reborn nor not reborn would not fit the case."

"All sensation by which one could predicate the existence of the Tathāgata, all that sensation has been abandoned, uprooted."

The same argument used for the body follows and again the same for perception, aggregates, and consciousness.

Then Vaccha, the wandering ascetic, spoke to him as follows:

"It is as if, O Gautama, there were a mighty *sala* tree [*Vatica robusta*] near to some village or town, and it were to lose its dead branches and twigs, and its loose shreds of bark, and its unsound wood, so that afterward, free from those branches and twigs, and the loose shreds of bark, and the unsound wood, it were to stand neat and clean in its strength. In exactly the same way does the word of Gautama, free from branches and twigs, and from loose shreds of bark, and from unsound wood, stand neat and clean in its strength. This is wonderful, Gautama! How wonderful it is, Gautama!"<sup>186</sup>

### *There Is No Adequate Answer*

Then Vacchagotta the Wanderer went to visit the Blessed One and said,

"Now, master Gautama, is there an *attan*?"

At these words the Blessed One was silent.

"How, then, master Gautama, is there not a *attan*?" For a second time also the Exalted One was silent.

Then Vacchagotta the Wanderer rose from his seat and went away.

Now, not long after the departure of the Wanderer, the venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One,

"How is it, Lord, that the Blessed One gave no answer to the question of the Wanderer Vacchagotta?"

<sup>186</sup> MN I.483–84 (*Aggivacchagotta Sutta* §72); Treckner, pp. 483–88. Translated into English by Warren (1922), pp. 123ff.; into German by Frauwallner (1956), pp. 19–24; into French by Bareau (1962), pp. 145–50, besides the translations quoted in the bibliography.

"If, Ānanda, when asked by the Wanderer, 'Is there an *attan*?' I had replied, 'There is an *attan*,' then, Ānanda, that would be siding with those recluses and brahmins who are eternalists.

"But if, Ānanda, when asked, 'Is there not an *attan*?' I had replied that it does not exist, that, Ānanda, would be siding with those recluses and brahmins who are annihilationists.

"Again, Ānanda, when asked by the Wanderer, 'Is there an *attan*?' had I replied that there is, would my reply be in accordance with the knowledge that all things are impermanent?"

"Surely not, Lord."

"Again, Ānanda, when asked by Vacchagotta the Wanderer, 'Is there not an *attan*?' had I replied that there is not, it would have been more bewilderment for the bewildered Vacchagotta. For he would have said, 'Formerly indeed I had an *attan*, but now I have not one anymore.'"<sup>187</sup>

### *The Typical Buddhist Calm*

The venerable Śāriputra thought to himself, "Where will the assembly of the *bodhisattva* and their disciples be able to sit?"<sup>188</sup>

Vimalakīrti said to him, "Why have you come, to listen to the *dharma* or to look for a chair?"

Śāriputra answered, "I seek the *dharma*, not a chair."

Then Vimalakīrti said,

"O Śāriputra, whosoever seeks after *dharma* attaches no value to life or to the body; how could he concern himself about a chair? Śāriputra, *dharma* is to be sought neither in matter, nor in form [*rūpa*], nor in sensations [*vedana*], perceptions [*saṃjñā*], mental inclinations [*saṃskhārā*] nor consciousness [*viññāna*]. In none of these aggregates [*skandha*] should we seek it, neither in the sense fields [*dhātu*], nor in the twelve doors of knowledge [*āyatana*].

"Venerable Śāriputra, whosoever seeks after *dharma* has no attachment to the truth of sorrow, nor does he look to the truth of the cessation of sorrow, nor does he look to walk the path that leads to the extinction of sorrow. And why? Because *dharma* stands apart from whatsoever discourse and has no representation. . . .

"Those seeking *dharma* are beyond attachment and rejection. Why? Because *dharma* cannot be possessed nor rejected. . . .

"Those seeking *dharma* seek not a refuge. There is no refuge in *dharma*. . . . If there were refuge in *dharma*, there would be attachment to the refuge, and not the pure search for *dharma*. . . . The one who seeks after *dharma* should not search for anything [else] in *dharma*.

"Therefore, venerable Śāriputra, if you seek *dharma* you must not seek any *dharma*. . . ."<sup>189</sup>

<sup>187</sup> SN IV.44. See C. A. F. Rhys Davids and Woodward's translation (1917–1930), pp. 281ff.

<sup>188</sup> Although this text makes no direct reference to the Buddha and is of relatively late date, it seems to me to be very characteristic of the spirit I seek to describe, and we include it as an important text. Furthermore, it is little known outside the learned world of scholars.

<sup>189</sup> Vimalakīrti, NirS VI.1–5. (We follow, with minor variations, Villalba's translation [1989], pp.73ff.).

The venerable Śariputra asked the divine maiden,

"How long have you been staying in this house?"

"Since Śariputra obtained liberation."

"Have you been here long?"

"Has Śariputra obtained liberation long ago?"

Śariputra held his peace and kept silence.

The divine maiden asked him again,

"Why do you remain so silent although you are so venerable and intelligent?"

"Liberation stands apart from all discourse. Hence I do not know what to say."

"All the words you have just spoken are aspects of liberation. Why? Because liberation does not take place inside or outside or in the middle. Likewise, your words are not inside or outside or in the middle. And so, Śariputra, it is impossible to speak of liberation beyond words. Why? Because the absolute identity of all things is what bears great liberation, and all things are aspects of liberation."

"Perhaps liberation is to be freed of passion, anger, and ignorance."

"The Buddha calls liberation being freed of all passion, anger, and ignorance only for those who are egocentric. For those who are not egocentric the Buddha will say that the nature of passion, anger, and ignorance is liberation itself."

Śariputra exclaimed,

"O maiden, very well said, very well said! What have you reached, what have you experienced, what made you so eloquent?"

"I have not obtained anything, I have not acquired anything. That is why I am so eloquent. And why? If someone thinks he has obtained or acquired something, that person has gone astray from the true *dharma*. . . ." <sup>190</sup>

Vimalakīrti then said to all the *bodhisattvas* present,

"O venerable ones, let each *bodhisattva* expound the *dharma* of nonduality according to his understanding and eloquence. . . ." <sup>191</sup>

Then Mañjuśrī turned to Vimalakīrti and said,

"Until now each one of us has been explaining his own opinion. Lord, I wish now that you would explain your opinion of what it means for a *bodhisattva* to penetrate the doctrine of a-duality."

Vimalakīrti remained silent; he did not say a word.

Mañjuśrī then praised Vimalakīrti, exclaiming,

"Very good! very good! When the phonemes, the sounds, the words, and the notions vanish, then appears the *dharma* of a-duality."

When these words were uttered, five thousand *bodhisattva* entered the *dharma* of a-duality and reached the certainty of non-rebirth and nondestruction and the patient tolerance that derives from it. <sup>192</sup>

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., VII.9–10.

<sup>191</sup> At this point more than thirty opinions are expounded over many pages of text.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., IX.1, 33.

## HERMENEUTICS

*ἀνec μοι ἵνα ἀναψύξω πρὸ τοῦ με<sup>1</sup>*

**The Transformation of Human Consciousness  
in the Buddha's Time and in Ours**

Certainly, one could attempt to "justify" the Buddha's "atheism" with an appeal to the history of his time, highlighting the religious inflation of the Brahmanism of his day, and showing that the attitude of the Enlightened One was only a healthy reaction to the baroque religion of his context. A touch of sobriety, a call to return to the essential—which turns out to be the existential—would then account for the attitude of the Buddha.<sup>2</sup> For my part, I have no doubt that all this is true. But it is precisely on this account that I cannot settle for an explanation of the Buddhist attitude based on a reference to the historical context of his time and wish to stress its greater anthropological depth. In order to do this, we have to consider, as much as possible, the human condition at the dawn of humanity. The Buddha's iconoclastic position is rooted in something much more profound than a mere reaction to the religious inflation of his time.

*The Three Areas of Human Consciousness*

Human consciousness is faced with three great problems—problems that have troubled humanity ever since it began to make use of its faculty of thought. There are three great dimensions of reality that consciousness has, in one way or another, always identified: the earth, the heavens, and the human being. These three spheres cannot be reduced, yet neither can they be separated.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, this is not a chronological classification, but a kairological process leading to a given "factor" predominating over the others in the field

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<sup>1</sup> "Let me be comforted a while / before I depart and be no more" (Psalm 38 [39]:13). "Et amplius non ero," says the Vulgate; "et non sim," amends the Nova Versio; "per non essere più," says the version by the Istituto Biblico of Rome; "et plus rien de moi," translates the Bible de Jérusalem; "und nicht mehr bin!" says Buber's version; "and cease to be," in the New English Bible; "and am known no more" according to Knox. On the loss of creatureliness that this psalm suggests, see also Job 14:10; 7:8, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Typical are the efforts of someone like Gandhi, for example, in trying to demonstrate that the Buddha was not atheist in the worst sense of the word. See his article in *Young India* (January 24, 1927) in which, speaking of the Buddha, he says, "He unhesitatingly said that law was God Himself. God's laws are eternal and not separate from God Himself. It is an indisputable condition of His very perfection. And hence the great confusion that Buddha disbelieved in God and simply believed in the moral law." See, by way of an example from religious sociology, the interesting study by Glasenapp (1962/2), pp. 111–24.

<sup>3</sup> This leads me to speak of the cosmotheandric vision of reality. See Panikkar (1993/XXXIII).

of human consciousness. Strictly speaking, the three spheres influence one another like the *rota in medio rota* in Ezekiel's vision, as interpreted by the mystic tradition.<sup>4</sup>

### *The World*

The first reality that man discovers is not himself but his surroundings, the things that threaten him or protect him. The first philosophical position (or prephilosophical, if one prefers) is an ecstatic attitude of man toward things and his questioning what things are. Astrology, music, and medicine are the first sciences; in parallel, agriculture, hunting, and architecture become the first techniques or arts. Nature is full of "things"—some of them hostile, others benign—and man must know them in order to adapt. Man is aware of the surrounding world. Religion as a way of salvation—however it may be interpreted—follows a path of pure objectivity: what counts is right action, in due respect for human constants and the rhythm of the universe alike. The principal form of worship is the offering of first fruits, with a view to the propitiation of natural forces.<sup>5</sup> What we are today accustomed to calling the "supernatural," the "superhuman," even the "divine," had then the appearance of a metacosmic "numinous," standing in intimate relationship with the "things," physical or psychic, that surround the human world.

Man feels little curiosity about himself, or about his peculiar position in the cosmos. A human being is just one more thing among so many others, and as such he regards himself and behaves accordingly. Consciousness is full, but self-consciousness has not yet risen. We might call this period the stage of "paradisiacal innocence": "original sin" had not yet been committed on a cultural level. The human mind had not yet folded back upon itself.<sup>6</sup>

### *The Divine*

Things, by their beauty or their wickedness, by their power or their weakness, seemed to point to something different from and superior to themselves, some invisible force or supreme power—immanent or transcendent—to mystery. Man realizes that he is not alone in the universe—that he is in the company of a great many other superior beings, protecting or thwarting him as much as the things that surround him. Thus emerges the world of the Gods, the Demons, and the divine sphere interpreted in the most varied forms. Man discovers his own dependence on this or that force, on this or those gods, and is compelled to establish a relationship with the numinous world. Religion is then what regulates relationships with the superhuman sphere and allows man to live side by side with the Divine universe. *Sacrifice* will be the primordial category, the sacred act that establishes the bond between humanity and the extra- or superhuman spheres. Sacrifice differs from the offering of first fruits because of the awareness that man offers something of himself ("the fruit of his own labor"), and not only for the purpose of returning what he has received from the divine sphere.<sup>7</sup> Sacrifice allows him to take an active part in the dynamism of the universe.

This is the religious moment par excellence: the presence of the numinous seems to absorb every human faculty. There is scarcely room for anything else; created things are considered unimportant, and man is almost overlooked. Human activity no longer turns to

<sup>4</sup> Ez 1:16.

<sup>5</sup> See Leeuw (1956); Brelich (1966).

<sup>6</sup> See Gen 3:1–7. See the ancient and suggestive thesis revived with historical and religious sensitivity by Zaehner (1963), pp. 63–95, etc.

<sup>7</sup> See Panikkar (1970/XI), pp. 54ff., and Vescei (1985).

things, but to the sacred. Temples are more important than houses. The best that society has to offer—whether persons or things—is dedicated to the divinity, from virgins to fields. The sciences cultivated are those that come to be called “sacred sciences.” The principal human interest is not about the earth but about the heavens; so-called theology is the queen of intellectual pursuits. The king and the wise man are subordinated to the priest, if these roles are not already united in a single person.

I do not mean that every stage of history derives from the preceding stage as an inevitable development. I only wish to point out these two attitudes of the human mind, influenced also by different lifestyles: the ecstatic attitude toward things, and the ecstatic attitude toward the divine. There is no doubt that one stage has preceded another “kairologically,” but we cannot say, in evolutionistic manner, that the second is the “evolution” of the first and, therefore, implicitly give a value judgment on both. Between the two stages there is a revolutionary leap in the social, economic, religious, and philosophical fields, whose scope escapes us, inasmuch as our proto-history generally originates from the moment of this separation of the cosmic from the divine.

### Man

Inasmuch as things point to God, God looks to Man. God’s interest seems to be concentrated on human beings; the divine occupation appears to be Man, and the gods, without the world of mortals, seem somehow to lose their *raison d’être*. Thus, when man discovers that God’s attention is focused on the human being, following, as it were, the divine gazing, he in turn discovers himself, and after an age of self-reflection comes to consider himself as the very center of reality.<sup>8</sup>

Things now appear in their constitutive relationship with man, and God is interiorized to the point that a divinity that existed for itself alone would be all but meaningless. Man discovers himself, and in discovering himself he finds (or loses) both God and the world. This is the moment of the awakening of self-consciousness, or reflexive consciousness, when the great religious reforms take place. For a certain period of time, anthropocentrism will be merely inferred and dissimulated, manifesting itself rather as a purification and interiorization of the notion of deity. Eventually it will shine with all its force when man comes to consider himself unambiguously as the “measure of all things,”<sup>9</sup> the mediator between heaven and Earth, and also the center of self-reference and, eventually, his own ontological core. The word of man becomes then ultimate Reality,<sup>10</sup> is transformed into primordial Word (*vac*)<sup>11</sup> and *logos* is divinized.<sup>12</sup> Now the *logos*, in spite of being identified with the Cosmic Christ,<sup>13</sup> has thrust all else aside. Even God, certain Christian theologians will come to say, is devoid of all existential meaning except through Christ, who “humanizes” Him and thereby transforms divinity into something real.<sup>14</sup> Idealism both East and West

<sup>8</sup> See Panikkar (1963/VI), pp. 178–253, where the problem is addressed from a Christian point of view.

<sup>9</sup> Protagoras in Plato, *Theaetetus* 151, and Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* VII.60 (Diels [1966], p. 2:263).

<sup>10</sup> Consider, e.g., *mīmāṃsā*.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Bāṛṭṭhārī, *Vākyapadiya* I.1.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Heraclitus, *Frag.* 1.2.50, etc. Cf. Kelber (1958).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jñ 1:1.

<sup>14</sup> It is here that the theological current of the “death of God” in its more serious aspects seems to me to be an unequivocal sign of the times.

represents the most powerful manifestation of this stage. The "spirit," although it may be called divine, is the amplification of the human spirit and invades all things. In short, the anthropological rules.

### *The Crisis of Human Consciousness*

These three stages, here briefly outlined, are not, let me repeat, three dialectical moments of an automatic process, although the sequence of events—historical and individual—may at times look like an evolutionary process at work in human history, as, indeed, in the development of the person. These historical changes, however, are in fact rarely the product of an internal process. More often, they are due to the vigorous intervention of one or several persons whose dynamic intuitions unleash a revolutionary change. This is surely what occurred in the change that civilization underwent at the beginning of the third and second millennia BC with the birth of the great Eastern civilizations, although the rise of these civilizations is lost in the origins of our prehistory. Something similar took place between the seventh and sixth centuries, at the time of the Buddha.

Almost certainly, in 563 BC<sup>15</sup> at Kapilavastu (Kapilavatthu), the principal city of the Śākya, was born Siddhartha (Siddartha), the son of Suddhodana and Mayadevi of the family (*gotra*) of the Gautamas.<sup>16</sup>

The sixth century before Christ saw a series of events so new that they have led some to posit the existence of a particular *Zeitgeist*, which has been spoken of as an "axial age."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the change wrought in the human race at this time was profound.<sup>18</sup> This was the century in which astrology, humanity's first science, took a new direction.<sup>19</sup> It was the century that marked the beginning of the great movement from *mythos* to *logos*, a process perhaps coming to something like a conclusion only in our own "demythologizing" age. Fissures now began to appear in humanity's ecstatic consciousness, permitting the infiltration of self-reflection that was to grow and expand up to our own modern age. Today, in fact, after a "critique of pure reason" and the refining of the same, following the respective criticisms of historical, critical, technological, scientific, dialectical, instrumental, and other types of reason, we have reached naked reason that no longer perceives itself as "pure" and is in need of a radical form of metano-ethics.<sup>20</sup> The migration to *logos* goes further and feels the need to return to the land of *mythos*. This, however, cannot be a regression. Lost innocence cannot be regained. We are in need of a new innocence.<sup>21</sup> The road is hard. The call of Buddhism may play an important role, although today such calls are reciprocal.

Going back to the sixth century BC, let us now consider some very basic data that will help us get an initial grasp of the scope of the Buddhist religious revolution. The reader

<sup>15</sup> Bareau (1964), pp. 3:12–213, gives 560–480 BC as the more approximate dates for the life of the Buddha.

<sup>16</sup> Generally regarded as a *kṣatriya* (noble warrior), although some continue to maintain that the Gautamas were of Brahmanic extraction. On the biography of Buddha, multiple works exist. See, e.g., E. J. Thomas (1933); Kalupahana (1982). The more personal interpretations of great interest include those of Deshpande (1984) and Kazantsakis (1983).

<sup>17</sup> *Achsenzeit*, according to Karl Jasper's classic expression (1968), pp. 14–31.

<sup>18</sup> See a development of the theme in Vesci (1962).

<sup>19</sup> See Rosenberg (1949), pp. 2ff.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Tanabe (1986).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Panikkar (1993/XXXII).



should bear in mind, of course, that in order to make a brief outline we have had to simplify a number of extremely complex religio-cultural processes.

To describe the characteristics of this outline, we should first of all say that its underlying thread is woven of *mythos*, *logos*, and *spirit*. Man cannot live without myth, nor can he be fully human, until he has developed his logical potential and spiritual capacity as well. Just as the essence of the "primitivism" of an archaic culture lies in its mythical charge, so the essence of the "barbarian character" of many contemporary cultures (especially in the West) lies in its excessive *logos* potential. If there is a single concept in which we might sum up the contribution that the Buddha could make to our times, it is the conviction that the *logos* cannot be divinized in any of its forms, either ontological (Omniscient Being) or epistemological (Reason) or cosmic (Matter). . . . *Mythos* and *logos* can coexist only in the *spirit*. But *spirit* cannot be "manipulated," either by *mythos* or by *logos*.

The *spirit* is freedom, and freedom may not be converted into either *mythos* or *logos*, or be submitted to either. And if the sixth century largely represents the awakening of the *logos* in the world of its great reformers, the Buddha's share in this great religious upheaval is all but unique, for it is Gautama who directly stresses the importance of the silence of the *spirit*. Silence is the dwelling place of *spirit*.

Let us see some crucial examples.

### *Israel*

In 587 BC, Israel falls into the hands of Babylonian invaders. This fall represents a real change not merely in the history but in the very consciousness of the Semitic peoples,<sup>22</sup> with repercussions in a wide segment of human history. Christianity, through its ties to the Old Testament, registers the change of scenario affected by the Babylonian captivity, and this event will forever stand as the symbol of any axiological change for the entire West.<sup>23</sup>

However, the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem represented the triumph of the religion of Israel rather than its collapse, because generally, when national religions, bound up with a single people, lose their places of worship, they collapse. The opposite happened with Israel. How can it be explained?

A transformation of the religious awareness of this people had already taken place. This was precisely the accomplishment of the great prophets of the previous century—those striking, solitary figures, so often in conflict with the "official" prophets, who rise up against the representatives of tradition and convention, and not only preach the purification of worship from all alienating influences,<sup>24</sup> but introduce radical innovations in worship itself.<sup>25</sup> The great prophets of Israel shatter the cosmic notion of sacrifice that had so often become a matter of mere magic, and substitute it with inner sacrifice and moral behavior.<sup>26</sup> "Mercy rather than

<sup>22</sup> From this viewpoint—of which we do not presume to give any political interpretations—the new "fall of Jerusalem" in 1967 might be regarded as a key date in this closing stage of the history of Western humanity, the stage of *logos* primacy. The present situation reinforces even more this perspective.

<sup>23</sup> For an appreciation of the extent to which the West is impregnated with Judaic and Christian representations, we might recall that even at the trial of Russian writers Andrej Sinjavskij and Yuli Daniel, the prosecutor asked Daniel what accusations he had tried to level against the Soviet people in his book *The Call of Moscow*, when he had spoken of "Babylon" rather than Moscow. See the account of the trial in *Encounter* 26 (1966): 88.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. 2 Chr 28ff.; Amos 5:21–27.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Sir 35:1ff.

<sup>26</sup> See Isa 1:16; Amos 5:24; Mic 6:8, etc.

sacrifice" now constitutes the leitmotif of the revolutionary preaching of that time.<sup>27</sup> Man begins to be more important than the act of worship, and mercy and social justice become a form of worship more agreeable to God than ritual celebration itself.

The effects of this change of attitude toward worship are not limited to the area of liturgy, where it indeed provokes a radical renewal. The very concept of God is called into question, and with it, the relationship of man with God.<sup>28</sup>

So, by the time the enemy is within striking distance of Jerusalem and about to destroy the places of worship, especially the main one, the Temple—the localization of worship in a fixed, exclusive place—had already lost most of its deeper significance, making it possible for YHWH to survive catastrophe.<sup>29</sup> YHWH survived the destruction of the Temple because YHWH had been delivered from nationalistic particularism and was in the process of transformation into the one personal God who cares for all nations.<sup>30</sup> Paradoxically, it is precisely Israel's renunciation in considering God as an exclusive monopoly of one people alone that defines a more universal place and mission in history.<sup>31</sup>

In a word, Israel's religiousness becomes reflexive. On one hand, man and his individual needs are now the center of the prophetic concerns. On the other hand, worship, now interiorized so as to allow commitment to a superior social justice, is universalized, simultaneously universalizing the deity to whom it is addressed.<sup>32</sup>

### *Iran*

During the same period, just before 600 BC in Iran, at the hands of a solitary prophet of the first magnitude, an analogous transformation occurs.<sup>33</sup> Although the elements produced in some works<sup>34</sup> are quite forceful, we are inclined to support a synchronistic interpretation that sets the Iranian problem in the context of an era when the wind seemed to blow over the whole of humanity and in the same direction. Indeed, the message of Zarathustra belongs to the overall movement of that age. The fact that Zarathustra may have anticipated by six or eight centuries the period in question and may have been a contemporary of Moses rather than of the Jewish prophets would make of him a unique phenomenon.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21; Jer 6:20ff. See also Amos 5:4ff.; Mic 2:2, 8.

<sup>28</sup> For a development of the topic of the influence of worship in the formation of the concept of God, see Vesci (1970).

<sup>29</sup> Compare the preaching of Amos, Hosea, and Micah with that of Isaiah, who constantly tries to save the famous "remnant of Israel." See also the different attitude of Eli, who dies when the Philistines have captured the ark (1 Sam 4:17ff.) because "the glory of God is departed," to be compared with the destruction of the Temple in 587 BC that represents not Yahweh's defeat but His victory.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Isa 37:16; 60:1ff., etc.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Isa 19:23ff.; 37:16; 54:14ff.; Jer. 10:10ff.

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Kaufmann (1960), particularly pp. 127ff. (The author emphasizes, perhaps excessively, the unique character of Israel's history and religion.) For a theology of all that we have been saying, see Kraus (1954), pp. 110ff.; Eichrodt (1959), vols. 1 and 2, esp. pp. 1:53ff.; and also Rad (1965), vol. 2; and so on. Due to the lack of a historical perspective, we cannot decide whether the rigid position of the state of Israel represents a return to the tribal God anterior to the prophets or a new irruption of the Old Testament. Modern-day events, however, do not show a positive *metánoia*.

<sup>33</sup> There is some disagreement as to the period of Zarathustra's activity, between the hyperbolic date of 6000 BC given by many of his contemporary followers, to immediately before the fifth century BC. See Henning (1951), pp. 37ff., with its recent dating to circa 1200 BC; Widengren (1965), pp. 61–376.

<sup>34</sup> See Burrow (1973).

<sup>35</sup> If Henning's dating is correct, of course, we are in the age of the attempted Egyptian reform

Reacting to a type of religiousness resting primarily on a ritual relationship between man and the Divine, based chiefly on the sacrifice of oxen,<sup>36</sup> Zarathustra arose as a reformer whose religion was centered on man, and with a message of personal and not simply collective salvation. Man is at the heart of the great cosmic struggle between the principles of Good and Evil. Man bears the burden not only of his own destiny but of the transformation of the whole world.<sup>37</sup>

In this great cosmic struggle, man is no longer a simple spectator at the mercy of superior forces, as had so often been the case with the religions of the first two stages described here. Now man is called to accomplish the final, eschatological victory of Good over Evil. This responsibility implies freedom, and freedom demands that ethical behavior become fundamental. Personal conscience is elevated to the status of the ultimate subject of morality.<sup>38</sup> Not only does the human position become central; the concept of divinity itself is deeply transformed.<sup>39</sup> Ahura Mazda, the "thinking Lord" or "wise Lord,"<sup>40</sup> is not only unique, but He is, in his very universality, absolute spirit, creator *ex nihilo* through the mediation of his own intellective activity,<sup>41</sup> and, at least in the beginning, altogether beyond the notorious dualism of Good and Evil traditionally attributed to the Iranian conception.<sup>42</sup> God is the Holy par excellence.<sup>43</sup>

In short: With Zarathustra, man emerges as personal conscience.

### China

During this same period, the great civilization of China passed through a similar politico-social and religious crisis, experiencing, with Confucius and Lao-tzu, the same reaction (if in different ways) to a fossilized cosmic-imperial order and a resulting thrust toward a more personal sense of justice and morality. The reaction against ritualism is, in fact, as typical as the call to personal conscience, which leads man to discover for himself where his own salvation—and that of the whole world—lies.

Indeed, Confucius repeatedly claimed that man is saved by the act of worship. But he insisted even more on the fact that worship brings salvation only when performed with a reflexive awareness of ritual and of the place of man in the cosmos. Behavior is essential and gives birth to silence.<sup>44</sup>

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of Pharaoh Akhenaton, which, however, unlike Zarathustra's, enjoyed no immediate success. Let us say immediate rather than lasting, because there is some truth in Freud's last work (1968).

<sup>36</sup> See *Yasna* XXIX.6ff.

<sup>37</sup> See Duchesne-Guillemin (1948), pp. 152ff.

<sup>38</sup> Zaehner (1961).

<sup>39</sup> See *Yasna* XXXIII.14; XXXIV.1ff; XLVIII.4ff.

<sup>40</sup> On the translation of the name Ahura Mazda, see Widengren (1965).

<sup>41</sup> See *Yasna* XL.8.1; XLIV.3ff.; XLVI.9; etc.

<sup>42</sup> See *ibid.*, III.1ff.: Spenta Manu and Angra Manu: the principles, respectively, of good and evil, are twins, and proceed from one Lord.

<sup>43</sup> See *ibid.*, XLIII.5ff., especially the refrain: "I understood that thou art holy, when. . ."

<sup>44</sup> See, by way of confirmation, Wang-Pi, author of a commentary on the *Tao-Tê-Ching*, who adopted a position similar to that of Kuo-Hsiang in his commentary on the Chuang-Tzu. Both commentators say that Confucius entered into a mystical state—"the state of inward silence and quietude." See Spencer (1963), p. 107; Fung Yu-Lan (1973), p. 2:171, comments that Wang-Pi "presents the very silence of Confucius as a token of his higher knowledge. It is because Confucius identified himself with the higher sphere of reality, which is for Wang Pi the sphere of 'non being' (*wu*)—as distinct from the realm of finite being (*yu*)—that the great sage said nothing about it."

Once more the human element is at the center of all religious concern. Wisdom holds first place among values.<sup>45</sup>

As for the Divine, Confucius's reform refuses to allow itself to be drawn into metaphysical speculations. Confucius's message is eminently practical.

For Lao-tzu, on the other hand, humankind is saved only through mystical union with the *Tao*, beyond any ritual apparatus.<sup>46</sup> Here also the process is ultimately the same: *personalization*.<sup>47</sup>

### Greece

A similar passage from the cosmological to the anthropological is to be observed, brilliantly and profoundly, in Greece of the same period. The spirit of the Greek movement is markedly religious, and this explains the almost religious fervor of the great figures of the time, although their formulations and speculative thrust belong to the order that has subsequently come to be called philosophical. The absence of a central prophetic character is counterbalanced by the speculative character of the reform.

Man ceases to be just one thing among many; he is transformed into a spectator, and later, into a judge, and with a critical attitude seeks the unity that lies hidden in multiplicity. Let us observe that, for a primordial mentality, plurality is a fact and unity a problem, whereas, by contrast, the mark of a critical mentality is the perception of multiplicity as unintelligible and provisional, and one must proclaim his struggle for unity at all costs. Setting aside traditional mythology, and inaugurating an autonomous critical reflection, the first philosophers did not convert Zeus, *Ananke*, and so on, into a First Principle, but sought the unity of apparent multiplicity elsewhere. Thales of Miletus, for example, sees water as the primordial element in which all things subsist.<sup>48</sup> Anaximander<sup>49</sup> and Anaximenes<sup>50</sup> spiritualize and intellectualize this principle into something less tangible, such as *apeiron* (the limitless), or more indivisible, such as air.<sup>51</sup> These thinkers do not yet perceive the deep conflict between the new intellectual exigencies and traditional religiosity. Only with Xenophanes will there be a global condemnation of mythology, in virtue of a moral urgency.<sup>52</sup> Not without reason was Xenophanes dubbed "the theologian."<sup>53</sup>

Those who were to attempt to reconcile the demands of intellectual research with a deep and markedly personal religious feeling were mainly Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Pythagoras, who founded a school whose purpose was personal salvation.<sup>54</sup> Empedocles—who was later worshipped as a god—taught, besides cosmology and scientific metaphysics, a method of

<sup>45</sup> See Confucius, *Dialogues* I.4.8.

<sup>46</sup> See *Tao-Te-Ching* XXIII. For a new interpretation, see Kuang-Ming Wu (1982).

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., Fung Yu-Lan (1973); Bary (1958).

<sup>48</sup> See Jaeger (1953), p. 29.

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* bk. 3, chap. 4.4 (203b10); Simplicius, *Physica* XXIV.13. ff.

<sup>50</sup> See Aristotle, *Physica* III.4.4.3 (948a5); Simplicius, *Physica* XXIV.26.

<sup>51</sup> See Caird (1958), pp. 1:58 ff.; Gadamer (1969), with monographs on this theme.

<sup>52</sup> See Jaeger (1953), the whole chapter devoted to Xenophanes, pp. 50–68.

<sup>53</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaphysica* 1.5 (968b18).

<sup>54</sup> Iamblicus, *De Vita Pythagorici* passim.; Plato, *Republica* X.600b. See the testimony of Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* V.11.67.3 (PG 9:101b): (ἡ τῆς πενταετίας σιωπῇ), which Migne translates thus: "Hoc sibi vult etiam Pythagoras quinque annorum silentium, quod praecipit discipulis" [Pythagoras, too, desires for himself this five years' silence that he enjoins on his disciples]. Likewise, Clement regards a five years' noviceship in silence as appropriate to spiritual life. See also Porphyrius's life of Pythagoras.

escape from the cycle of reincarnations.<sup>55</sup> Heraclitus discovered, as it were, the *logos*,<sup>56</sup> the cornerstone of the whole subsequent Western intellectual construction.<sup>57</sup>

At about the same time, the Mysteries, especially the Orphic and the Eleusinian, had developed and were reaching the peak of their splendor.<sup>58</sup> This is highly relevant since in the Mysteries the individual is at the center of salvation.

The movement is the same in other places and other cultures. Yet it cannot be denied that the "Greek miracle" of this period, though not unique, was historically irreversible. The discovery of man in his secular dimension has begun.<sup>59</sup>

### India

In India this was not a time of crisis as it was in Israel, where people were faced with catastrophe; or in Iran, where religious reform had an economic and social aspect; or in Greece, theatre of deep political upheavals; or in China, where the imperial order was being challenged.

In India the movement was mainly an inner event, beginning with the priestly class itself, with individuals who had perceived the necessity of a simplification of their sacrificial worship. Indeed, the spiritual history of Dravidian India has yet to be written.

In India the phenomenon appeared to be universal and was not limited to Buddhism only. In this same period we have Vardhamana, known as Mahāvīra, who was practically the founder of the Jain religion, which already existed as a differentiated spirituality. He preached a message of renunciation and total nonviolence by virtue of this same attention to interiority, and mental concentration on the human subject (*ātman*) who can cultivate meditation and make ultimate reality real.<sup>60</sup>

However, it is not only in the so-called heterodox systems of reaction against Brahmanism that this trend was manifested. At the heart of orthodoxy itself we witness a whole movement of interiorization, antiritualism, and antitraditionalism. We have figures like Uddakala Aruṇi, his son Śvetaketu, and King Janaka. In particular, we have the celebrated genius Yājñavalkya and, of course, we have Śaṅḍilya. All these allow Hinduism to preserve its continuity and not break with the Vedic *śruti*, yet to deeply modify and transform itself.<sup>61</sup>

The reaction of these men is well known. They were bearers of a new awareness whose repercussions were to be felt not only in a different reflective concept of man but also in a new idea of the Divine. The very relationship between the Divine and man would no longer

<sup>55</sup> See Empedocles, *Frag* 112/170.

<sup>56</sup> See Heraclitus, *Frag* B 1 and 2.

<sup>57</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.3 (983b ff.); *De Anima* 1.2 (405a 19); 1.5 (411a 7); etc. See also Diogenes Laertius, 1.24 ff. Cf. Heraclitus's enigmatic expression *Frag* 45: (βαθὺς λόγος) [deep *logos*]. Compare this *Ungrund-logos* with the "Ungründen Gottes" of the New Testament (Rom 11:33; 1 Cor 2:10). Cf. the expression of Clement of Alexandria, in his first epistle, *Ad Corinthios* XL.1: (τὰ βαθὺ τῆς θείας γνώσεως). Is it these "depths of the divine knowledge" that the Buddha will help us penetrate? Cf., incidentally, Rev 2:24, "depths of Satan" (τὰ βαθύα τοῦ σατανά), which the Vulgate translates "altitudines Satanae."

<sup>58</sup> See the collective work *Mysteries* in the *Eranos* series, and *the Mystic Vision* in the same series; Casel (1919); Sabbarucci (1979); Pettazzoni (1954); Kerényi (1976).

<sup>59</sup> Jaeger (1947); Kerényi (1972); Otto (1974).

<sup>60</sup> Tradition places Mahāvīra's *nirvāṇa* in 527 BC. Another date proposed is 477 BC. See Schubring (1925), p. 3:221; Shanta (1985), p. 113; Jainisinus; della Casa; Gialnismo.

<sup>61</sup> See Vesci (1985), p. 442, where the historical continuity of the process is demonstrated. See also Panikkar (1977/XXV).

be lived according to the Vedic schema, with its great emphasis on *karma-marga*. This relationship would now take the form of an intellectual, cognitive process, replacing the karmic structure of sacrifice without destroying it—claiming indeed to reveal its deepest significance.

Thus man becomes the center of the salvific and sacrificial process, while the Divine is both unified and universalized. The source of much insight is developed from the later hymns of the *R̥g Veda*, with their search for unity in multiplicity.<sup>62</sup> The single principle underlying all and present in all is the *Brahman*,<sup>63</sup> which is likened to salt that, when dissolved in water, lends its savor to the whole.<sup>64</sup> Thus the *brahman* becomes identified with the *ātman*, and the discovery of this equation is the foundation of the Upaniṣadic way of salvation.<sup>65</sup> The efficacy of worship consists not in the external action, but in intention and, ultimately, in understanding.<sup>66</sup> Meditation on the sacrifice is equivalent to the sacrificial action itself.<sup>67</sup> The offering of self,<sup>68</sup> including the sacrifice of the word in breathing and the sacrifice of breathing in the word,<sup>69</sup> leads to the sublimation of all cultic worship in the realization of one's self: *tat tvam asi* (that you are).<sup>70</sup> While Greece, in this period, had discovered the human principle of all things, India considered the divine principle in man: *aham brahmā asmi* (I am *brahman*).<sup>71</sup>

In this context, the revolution of Gautama the Buddha seems more intelligible, but not less extraordinary. Indeed, I do not believe that the context in which the Buddha's message appears can be limited to his immediate environment, but rather belongs to that decisive, peculiar moment in the history of humanity, characterized, sociologically at least, by the dawning awareness of subjectivity. In all the cases we have mentioned from that remarkable sixth century, we find a common denominator: on one hand, a reaction against pure objectivity (whether we choose to call it transcendence, God, tradition, custom, or what have you) and, on the other hand, the ascent of man. The great prophets of Israel, the sages of the Upaniṣads, the great Chinese reformers, the Greek philosophers, and so forth only turn man's gaze inward, to discover that intention is essential in any activity, and that a critical attitude is indispensable for any genuinely human act. It is no longer possible to follow blindly the opinion of the ancients or to have a magical faith in traditional rites. What matters is man, and consequently his intention. Mere speculative disquisitions, which the Buddha labels useless and pernicious, represent dead objectivity here. What matters is the concrete person and his or her existential liberation. All ideas, not excluding the idea of God, are a sort of refuge where human beings have fled because they were afraid of themselves. The Buddha seeks to deliver man from all these fears, making him aware of a decisive, universal testimony of unanimous experience: suffering and our innate attempts to be liberated from it.

Greece claims that man matters more than things. The Upaniṣads preach that what is essential is not external sacrifice and ritual worship, but the human intention and interiorization.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. RV X.121, 129. *Mahad devanam asurtvam ekam* [Great is the single Divinity of the Gods], states emphatically RV III.55.1.

<sup>63</sup> This is especially significant inasmuch as the *brahman* was originally simply the formula, the prayer of sacrifice. Its assumption to the status of First Principle is another aspect of the Upaniṣadic sublimation of sacrifice. See Gonda (1960).

<sup>64</sup> See CU VI.13.

<sup>65</sup> See BU II.5.1; CU III.14.4; MandU II, etc.

<sup>66</sup> See SB X.5.2.20; CU VIII.4.3; MaitrU VI.34; MundU III.2.9, etc.

<sup>67</sup> See TS V.3.12.2; BU I.1ff.; and NBh *in hoc loco*.

<sup>68</sup> See SB XI.3.1ff.; CU III.16.1ff.

<sup>69</sup> See KausU II.5.

<sup>70</sup> CU VI.8.7, etc.

<sup>71</sup> BU I.4.10.

China teaches that the essential thing is consciousness of the harmony of man with the whole. Zarathustra declares that the fundamental thing is conscious personal salvation. The prophets of Israel cry that YHWH does not save or hear unless our heart is pure. Man and his consciousness are transformed into the heart of the religious and human reforms of the time.

Humanism, with its ups and downs, begins its course through human history.

### *The Buddha's Innovation*

The phenomenon outlined above was generally common to the universal reform of the sixth century BC. In the Buddha, however, we discover a new tonality. All the other reform movements are centered on man. The Buddhist preaching, along with the Jainist, simply transcends man. The Buddha directly addresses *awakening*.<sup>72</sup> To the Buddha the *revelation* is the unveiling of the way of salvation, without ontological frills of any kind concerning either God, World, or Man.<sup>73</sup> Just as each of the three principles has a tendency to swallow the other two, as it were, this fourth principle (the revelation that awakens and enlightens) focuses on the pure experience in which God, World, and Man exist.

To what avail do we demythologize God—the Buddha would ask us in modern language—if in so doing we mythologize Man? What advantage is there in discovering how easy it is to transform God into an idol, if we thereupon set up Man in God's place? Faced with the three fundamental questions (What are the *things* of the World? Who is the *God* who sustains them? Who is *Man* who uses and knows them?), the three great questions of human history that sum up the three fundamental anthropological moments, the Buddha cuts short. To reach beyond the possible answers, the Buddha dissolves the question itself into silence. He cancels the very *locus* of human query and calls for a great trust in liberating enlightenment (convinced as he is that any man can attain it), stating that the only thing that matters for the extinction of all limitation and contingency and therefore existence is right *action*. If we look carefully, we see that the trust the Buddha asks is not a new acceptance of someone else's experience, but a great trust in the enlightenment of our own experience. It is not a matter, then, of renouncing knowledge, on the implicit presumption that there is something real to know and a real subject to do the knowing. It is a question of recognizing that creatureliness cannot transcend itself, and that, consequently, nothing in the order of being, nothing that develops in space and time, can be included in the realization of what ultimately matters. And what ultimately matters is the *orthopraxis* that eliminates contingency—that is, suffering.

We have already said that Man at the time of the Buddha was discovering self-awareness. The Buddha goes further. He discovers the fallacy of this *ātman* or subject; he shows us how in the end this *autos*, this self of consciousness, is regarded as a *héteros*, a more or less objectified "other." When the subject returns to itself, when the subject becomes conscious, it reifies itself, objectivizes itself—it ceases, ultimately, to be a subject. It splits itself in two, and one part of itself (at least the part that is known) is converted into an object. The deepest awareness cannot be self-awareness. In other words, the identity *A is A* is not possible; it is a deception. Either *A is A'*, and then the identity is not complete, the object known is not totally identical with the subject that knows; or else the identity is absolute—*A is A*—and then identity is superfluous, for absolutely everything that the first *A is* is what the second

<sup>72</sup> The name that prevailed for Gautama, the name of the *consensus populi*, so to speak, is precisely that of Buddha (from *bodhi*), the Awakened.

<sup>73</sup> Mus (1935), p. 37, was able to write that "L'aventure personnelle de Śākyamuni, est l'archétype de la révélation" [The personal adventure of Śākyamuni is the archetype of revelation].

*A is*. Then it becomes simply meaningless to speak of a first and of a second *A*. The only nonautological formulation, then, would be the simple proposition, *A is*. But at this point the Buddha would say: the *A* that *is* in "*A is*" is not the *A* that would be the subject of the formula of identity, but its predicate. That is, the first *A* is not; the only thing that is, is the second *A*: *is A*. There is no identity, because there is no subject. Whatever *is*, *is* predicate; therefore we exist. Surely we are the predicates of a subject that is not a subject at all—for in expressing the world, or rather in expressing being, the subject has died, has emptied itself altogether, has totally immolated itself, has given all that it has and that it was, all that *is* its own authentic, total expression, to its manifestation, epiphany, person, cosmos, world, *saṃsārā*. . . . It is the failure to understand the Buddha's genial intuition in conceiving reality that has led more than one scholar to say that Buddhism is not a religion. And indeed, what is specifically sacred and traditionally religious belongs to the second stage of human consciousness, that is, the theocentric stage. Let us remember that the first stage is cosmocentric and the third anthropocentric.

Religious, sacral Christianity, as it has commonly been interpreted until now, belongs also to this second stage. Religious institutions of the sixth century BC in general, and later Christianity, have had to struggle through the thick crust of centuries to reach the present stage of human consciousness. This is what is commonly called the "secularity" (divorcing it from its own narrow historical origins) of both culture and religion.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, more than one attempt has been made, over the past twenty-five centuries, to express the other dimension of humankind and of reality. Perhaps, however, humanity as a whole was not yet mature enough for this, and the other two dimensions would have risked being eliminated altogether. Yet the fate of the human race largely depends on its capacity to balance all three dimensions—and it is here that the role of the Enlightened One seems to me to be of exceptional relevance.

I realize, of course, that the initiatives and also the complications have mostly come from the Christian field, or more precisely, from the West. Yet perhaps the solution is to be found in a positive symbiosis between the traditional and the contemporary religions of East and West, North and South.

Strictly speaking, can there be an atheistic religion? If by atheism we mean antimonotheism, the Buddha's answer is drastic: only an atheistic religion can actually be a religion. All the rest is pure idolatry, the worship of a god who is the work of our hands or our mind.<sup>75</sup> The Buddha will not say that God is a "creation" of the human mind. After all, neither is a fetish a total creation of the idolatrous artist. Matter exists, just as God exists. Matter can be adored, just as there is the divine demand that we adore God. But just as the theist will accuse the fetishist of forgetting that God infinitely transcends the idol, so likewise, the Buddha will reproach the theist for having forgotten that the "Mystery" is still infinitely distant from what the theist claims to worship or, at least, to name.<sup>76</sup> The word

<sup>74</sup> For a preliminary orientation on the subject, see the following bibliography: Gogarten (1963); Loen (1965); Lübke (1965). For an evaluation of these works, and of the literature on the subject more generally, see Spann (1948); Aubrey (1954); Nichols (1956); Meland (1963); Munby (1963); Cox (1965); Mascal (1965); Newbiggin (1966); Scheidt (1966); R. G. Smith (1966); B. R. Wilson (1966); and Panikkar (1979/XXII).

<sup>75</sup> "Connaitre la divinité seulement comme puissance et non comme bien, c'est l'idolâtrie" [To know the divinity only as power and not as good, this is idolatry] (Weil [1962], p. 48). Indeed, the very claim to "know" God—in any way—is in and of itself idolatry. Cf. Denis the Areopagite, *Epistula I ad Caium* (PG 3:1065A) "Et si quis videns Deum (ἰδὼν θεόν) cognovit quod videt ipsum Deum non vidit" [If someone, seeing God, knew what he saw, he did not see God].

<sup>76</sup> See the much-cited expression of the Fourth Lateran Council—actually an aside (and it could



"supratheism" would be as unsatisfactory as "theism," for strictly speaking no word can express that which declares itself inexpressible.<sup>77</sup> It is significant that virtually no one has noticed that so-called polytheism is not atheism. To represent polytheism as the contrary of monotheism is a logical error: they do not have the same predicate but a different concept of the Divine. No "polytheist" has ever affirmed that "what" the monotheist recognizes as *monos* (one) is *polys* (many).

The Buddha does not elaborate on the transcendent character of the Divine. For the very reason he believes the divine mystery to be transcendent, he disregards it altogether (he is not God's keeper and defender) and addresses himself to the ultimate end of religion: human salvation, showing others the way. Buddhism is religion not because it reconnects ("*re-liga*"), as the Latin etymology suggests, but because it frees, it breaks the bonds ("*des-liga*"). In this context, however, we shall not go over Zubiri's analysis.

The Buddha's century is a religious century par excellence. All of its reforms, even the most advanced and daring, even those that appeared scandalous at the time, were religious reforms. The peculiar novelty of Śakyamuni's innovation consists in the elimination of what so many of his day and ours thought and think to be the basic religious category: God. It cannot be denied, then, that the concept of a godless religion or, better, of an atheistic religion, if correctly understood, fits. This, in my view, is both the point of contact and the difference between Buddhism and the attitude of our own times, which we have defined as religious atheism. A religion without God was what the Buddha preached (to use language that would have sounded strange indeed to his ears); a non-God as the foundation of religion (that is, of the ultimate attitude of man) could be the briefest way to sum up the phenomenon of contemporary atheism.

### *Religious Atheism*

We lack the vantage point, obviously, that would enable us to characterize our time in an appropriate way, and to authoritatively recognize the "signs of the times."<sup>78</sup> Still, I do not think we shall be very far from the mark if we recognize in so-called contemporary atheism a new, urgent phenomenon of relevant magnitude, one of the great moments of humanity, deserving to be placed side by side with the sixth century before the Christian era. Indeed, certain external aspects of our era are astoundingly novel (discovery of the sciences and technological achievements); nevertheless, these are only superficial variations (whether by way of cause or effect is of no concern here) compared to the issue of the possible point of mutation that humankind is reaching concerning the questions dealing not with what man can and should do, but what his very being is. Science and technology can be handled, and actually are, in the case of the majority of persons who reap their fruits with a more or less correct and adequate attitude. But something new is

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not be otherwise since we can speak of this only indirectly): "*Quia inter creatorem et creaturam non potest similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notando*" [For it is impossible to observe a likeness between the Creator and the creature without observing an even greater unlikeness] (Denzinger and Schönmetzer [1967], no. 806). Compare this with the prohibition of uttering the name of YHWH in Judaism (cf. Ex 20:7)—as generally the name of God in many so-called primordial religions.

<sup>77</sup> See the seventh and last proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (1922): "*Wörter über man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen*" [Concerning that of which we cannot speak, we ought to keep silence.]

<sup>78</sup> This Evangelical expression (Mt 16:3) and its use in Jn 23 have acquired in the last few years a very particular shade of meaning.

happening to man in his very structure. The change takes the shape of an anthropological mutation, not necessarily for the best.<sup>79</sup>

Technology is penetrating into the very being of man like an intravenous injection. Not that man is necessarily dominated by the machine, not that the machine has conquered man, but it seems as if a hybrid, a new type of man, is in the process of painful and problematic gestation. Certainly, great perceptive, prophetic figures and thinkers have appeared in these last centuries, but none of the stature of a Śakyamuni, a Zarathustra, or a Confucius has been able or in a position to personify this movement nor to guide, "sublimate," or cause to "precipitate" (in the chemical sense of the word), or at least to assist at the birth of this "new man" still in gestation.<sup>80</sup> So far, the main attempt has been to provide a basis for social, sociological, and even economic behavior. The problem has not yet been addressed from a deeply religious, theological-philosophical, and anthropological standpoint, in the awareness that a structural human mutation is transpiring. An *orientating* force is still wanting, a force that could provide insight as to the direction this change might or ought to take. What is needed today is a power that in the old, traditional schema could have been defined as "prophetic"—in order to seek a path toward the full human assimilation and overcoming of the new dehumanizing conditions imposed by contemporary civilization.

Furthermore, such force should be matched by another force that could be defined as a *harmonizing* power (having the functions that traditionally were ascribed in the past to "royal" power), and having the capability of authoritatively channeling and coordinating harmoniously the various currents of this superficially atheistic movement of humanity. Without such coordinating power there is the risk that the message of "modernity" is either dispersed in rivulets of neither form nor consistency, or else becomes the victim of its own excesses.

But even imagining that such an individual figure, or movement, endowed with this manner of unifying force could finally be produced, we would still require a third force, *mediating* between the human predicament and a transcendence that, as such, escapes human experience. The human predicament may appear self-sufficient in its reciprocal solidarity, but the fact remains that left to itself it tends to suffocate. Its intrinsic sacrality projects it toward the infinite, toward eternity, and unless it is willing to remain irremediably closed off within the spatio-temporal coordinates that delimit it, it will have to be able to find a form of mediation with an extra-human order of salvation. This is the traditional function known by the name of "priesthood."

All these three powers (a prophetic voice, a royal power, and a sacerdotal charisma, to use traditional notions) would be indispensable in order to embody the spirit of the present time—to channel it toward a physiognomy that would not be too dispersive or dehumanizing and also to supply an orientation to the new generations that can no longer breathe the air of the prairies of an "agricultural civilization," but who are not yet able to live a fully human life again in the world of *techno-culture*. In the new situation that is emerging, what really matters is not the objectivity of science and technology, nor the relationship with the social environment that it has produced, but rather the subjectivity that is penetrating man and transforming his very being.

Now, it is precisely here, and in this new and profound sense, that the phenomenon of atheism appears, which we are trying to grasp in its contemporary dimension. Using the word

<sup>79</sup> The likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, even Aurobindo, could be mentioned here, for all their diversity, as representative figures of this new situation.

<sup>80</sup> See Panikkar (1964/1). Developments in these last decades seem to suggest that the negative aspect of technology is gaining the upper hand.

in all its due depth and seriousness (which, at times, is lacking because of its polemical use by critics and apologists), atheism represents precisely one of the most tangible signs of the anthropological change that I have been sketching. The atheism to which I refer is not that of the "moderns" who have pronounced God dead. Nor does it reside in the fact (although this is also new in the history of humanity) that an ever-increasing number of individuals live a practical atheism. This is surely an important phenomenon, but precisely in virtue of its importance, it has already been adequately investigated.<sup>81</sup> Rather, the new phenomenon in the contemporary movement of the West is that so-called believers as well as ill-defined unbelievers are living without a vital reference to a transcendence that would orient them in any way.

To be sure, man has seen God supplanted on other occasions, and traditionalists have many times denounced the scandal of atheism. However, so far there had always arisen a new absolute in some objectified form that replaced God, although such absolute mostly lacked in transcendent consistency, having chosen as a landmark the Earth or Man, falling thus into relativism (in quite a different manner from Buddhist and even Christian relativity).

It has always been suggested that without the idea of an objective mainstay in some absolute (however it may be conceived), man would fall apart. This has always been the strong point of the opponents of atheism: man needs an external ideal to sustain him and give him a reason for living. Nowadays we hear that it matters little if this ideal no longer rests on a transcendent foundation beyond the visible world; the transcendence in question can just as well be posited on the human level and transferred to abstract ideas of Reason, Humanity, Society, and the like—concepts that, in one way or another, also transcend the individual as such and give a person an objectified motive for living and something in which to believe. And surely there is no denying that the overwhelming majority of persons still live supported by "something" that to genuine atheists looks like a desperate attempt to find compensatory consolation for human contingency. But this does not seem to me to be the main center of gravity of our new predicament. That man may be in need of an ideal to fill and support his finitude is rather evident; without an external goal for which to strive, man may fall victim not only to an egocentrism that results in dishonesty toward his neighbor but to the boredom caused by the meaninglessness of a contingent life that ends up delimiting and stifling itself. Man must find a goal that is superior to himself and his own story. What I contemplate is the emerging in contemporary man of a tendency to adopt ideals of a personal nature to support the need to believe<sup>82</sup>—in other words, an atheistic faith.

Another reason for this phenomenon is that many of the functions traditionally carried out by God are now realized by humans, with the aid of science and the efficiency of technology. Everything having to do with the material aspect of existence is today in the hands of modern man, not only where the health of the body is concerned—the struggle against death, the defeat of various infectious diseases, and so on—but even in the area of ecology. Man believes he can control droughts and floods, and it is increasingly difficult to find someone who will turn to God rather than the doctor for healing,<sup>83</sup> or who does not bother to have an emergency water supply in case the seasons fail. The arrival of second-degree technique

<sup>81</sup> The current bibliography on atheism is simply overwhelming. I shall not attempt even a skeleton outline here. See Girardi (1967–1970).

<sup>82</sup> Let us remember a popular etymology of belief: in Latin *credere* [to believe] derived from *cor* and *dare* "to give one's heart," "to set one's heart . . . on something." The etymology of the Sanskrit word *śraddha* is the same. See Panikkar (1983/XXVII).

<sup>83</sup> When certain religious groups do so—for example, the Jehovah's Witnesses—they are regarded as "abnormal" and "fanatical" by persons who define themselves as "normal."

(technology) has put man in the position to consciously assume the role formerly attributed to a God more or less *ex machina*. Religion, consequently, as well as any kind of ideal, even God, can be maintained only as private phenomena.<sup>84</sup> God is no longer the driving force and support of civilization.<sup>85</sup> If you ask him why we still have floods and famines, since it is possible to find remedies, modern man does not want to hear God mentioned, but calls for more effective technologies, or for the improvement of moral behavior, for less selfishness.

From a practical point of view, it might be said that what is happening to humankind is the implementation of a sort of concentration of the World, Man, God triad into a single "thing" clearly more akin to Man than to the other two dimensions of the Real. Thus we are not dealing precisely with the "death of God" but with something much more like assimilation, a swallowing of God by Man. In reality, God is not dead but Man has eaten God. This expression in a way describes perfectly the consequence of the secularized development of the principal Christian rite. Man has received his God in communion, and has definitively swallowed Him. We represent this "atheistic" process rather like a "sublimation" of God, in the chemical connotation of the concept. In other words, God understood as Other, as abiding Substance, as Foundation of all, or better yet, as what is Stable, Solid, Being, is sublimated, volatilized, passing into the gaseous state of function, horizon, ideal, mystical dimension, and so forth.<sup>86</sup> The corrosive power of human consciousness, and especially of thought, destroys any objectification and hence the substantialization of transcendence, to the point of corroding the entrails of subjectivity itself, volatilizing the subject itself.<sup>87</sup> This is where we feel that Buddhism appears as a pressing human experience very relevant to our times.

To the "atheistic" religion of Buddhism corresponds the modern-day "religious atheism." I call it "religious"—fully aware of the ambivalence of the word—because I wish to highlight the fact that we are dealing with an ultimate radical attitude and to point out that the issue is not merely philosophical or even ideological, but concerns precisely what from a certain time onward, and in virtue of a preponderance of the Mediterranean spirit, we have convened to call "religion"—thus universalizing this word of Western languages and extrapolating it beyond its merits.<sup>88</sup> It ought to be clear, then, that in calling this kind of atheism "religious," I have no intention of comparing it with the theistic religions following the schema generally employed when speaking of "religion."<sup>89</sup> I mean only that this atheism "saves" man from the clutches of a transcendence that is alienating (when deprived of the corresponding immanence) and delivers him from the oppression of superstition as well as from the blind faith

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<sup>84</sup> The traditional Indian idea of the *Iṣṭadevatā*—that is, of the Divinity that manifests itself to fulfill our need for worship—does not mean a privatization of religion but its personalization. We must not confuse these two notions.

<sup>85</sup> Thus we have a reversal of the previous situation, in which it was the atheist who took a subjective view of religious behavior founded on supposed objectivity. Now it is no longer God who provides for our needs, but the industrial machine; no longer St. Barbara who protects us from lightning, but the lightning rod, and so on.

<sup>86</sup> "Il y a deux athéismes dont l'un est purification de la notion de Dieu" [There are two kinds of atheism, of which one is a purification of the notion of God], wrote Weil (1948), p. 132, with her usual concision. The idea is of old. In Philo, followed by Justin Martyr and by other Church Fathers, the word "atheism" was already used to indicate the negation of God (or the fact of not knowing Him, *Deum ignorant*), on one hand, or the belief in a false God, on the other. Cf. Wolfson (1964), pp. 81ff., for the pertinent citations.

<sup>87</sup> "Ah! What is man?" exclaimed Sophocles. "Whosoever defines him dies."

<sup>88</sup> See Panikkar (1990/36).

<sup>89</sup> Note also that nor is this concept derived from the New Testament.

in science. And one of the privileges of what we call "religion" is the privilege of securing "salvation," whatever we may mean by "salvation."<sup>90</sup> This atheism, vanquishing the mirages of past and future, finds itself once more before the present, and sees itself obliged, in one way or another, to endow that present with all the consistency that "eternalists" would bestow upon it, but without substantializing it, without converting it into eternity, into an other (*aliud*), an idol.<sup>91</sup> Again, we find ourselves confronted with the acceptance of pure contingency, although this time we near this "truth" following a path that differs from Buddhist intuition, discovering new elements.

This is another aspect in which the encounter with Buddhism can be fertile.

My hypothesis, which I advance only as an essay in the hermeneutic of the present time, comes to this: the core of what until now has been called "atheism" (which of course would be better called by another name, seeing that the connotation of a mere negative reaction is not adequate) is not only a kind of reaction against a series of weak propositions on the existence of a Supreme Being, as has been taken for granted by most "believers" till now. It is not a kind of corrective for theism. It represents, rather, a new step in the journey of man, a new degree of consciousness comparable to that which occurred at the moment of the great reform regarding the interiorization of the religious spirit of man. There "is" no God, but ultimately only because neither "there is" Man. Atheism seems to be arousing in the conscience of man a sort of mutation, one that need

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<sup>90</sup> In case anyone should continue to assert that there is no religion in this attitude, I transcribe here, without commentary, Friedrich Nietzsche's poem "Dem unbekannten God" ("To the Unknown God"), which he wrote when he was not yet twenty years old.

"Noch einmal, eh ich weiter ziehe / und meine Blicke vorwärts sende / Heb ich vereinsamt meine Hände / Zu dir empor, zu dem ich fliehe, / Dem ich in tiefster Herzenstiefe / Altäre feierlich geweiht, / Dass allezeit / Mich deine Stimme wieder riefte. / ( . . ) / Darauf erglühst tief eingeschrieben / Das Wort: dem unbekannten Gotte. / ( . . ) / Ich will dich kennen, Unbekannter, / Du tief in meiner Seele Greifender, / Mein Leben wie ein Sturm Durthschweifender, / Du Unfassbaren, mir Verwandter! / Ich will dich kennen, selbst dir dienen."

[Ere I stride ahead once more,  
ere I steer my gaze unto the fore,  
this one last time I lift my hands  
to thee, the one I flee,

—the one to whom, in my heart's remote recesses  
I consecrated solemn altars once—  
and beg that ever and again

thy voice call to me.

(Upon thy holy table), writ deep, and glowing,

I read: To the unknown God.

(His am I! Oh, true, till now

Have I dallied in the gang of kings,

and feel the serpents drag me to the fray

and—ah, could I but flee!—constrain me

to serve Him.) Thee would I know, Unknown,

plunged in my deepest soul

like a storm, overwhelming my life.

O Unseizable, like unto myself!

I would know thee, nay, thee serve!]

Cited by C. Siegmund in Girardi (1967–1970), p. 2:265.

<sup>91</sup> See Casper (1981).

not necessarily be interpreted in the framework of a social biology, nor suggest a return to the old myth of the "superman."<sup>92</sup>

This mutation, not yet concluded but manifesting itself sporadically, and striving to express itself correctly but failing, means neither that the creature is nothing and God is all,<sup>93</sup> nor that the creature is all and God is nothing,<sup>94</sup> nor that there is a little room for Creation in the bosom of the Divine.<sup>95</sup> In other words, neither monism nor dualism; neither pantheism, nor atheism, nor theism correspond to the profound experience that man of our time seeks to express. The World, Man, and God considered as three separate and independent entities are incompatible: there is not enough room for everybody. In reality, however, World, Man, and God are intimately intertwined in a founding *perichôresis*.<sup>96</sup> A world without human beings is without meaning; a God without creatures would cease to be God; a Man without a World would not be able to subsist, and without God he would not be truly human. God is sublimated, as I have said, but the sublimation must now be condensed somewhere, and it is the human inner dimension that will supply the walls for a crystallization of God in Man; not, however, as a distinct being, come to take refuge in our interior, but as something that is ours by right, and that had only been momentarily removed. But all metaphor is dangerous here, especially if it is interpreted with substantiality in mind. Perhaps "God" did die; but in that case what is happening now is that God is risen, albeit not as "God" but as man. Yet something similar might also be said about man. Man has died and has risen as God. Man is neither God, nor the center of everything. Neither is God. There is no center.

It is not just that, practically speaking, we ought to live *as if* God did not exist, as in a way Ignatius of Loyola suggested and as Buddhist monks had already acknowledged of old and Zen has subsequently popularized.<sup>97</sup> It is not just that in the ethical order the believer cannot rely on the privilege of a detailed law given by God, or feel bound by such a law.<sup>98</sup> The new atheism is not limited to this. Strictly speaking, the new atheism rises up neither to combat nor to deny God unequivocally. What the modern mentality really demands is that God should not be absolutized, either in the traditional theistic sense<sup>99</sup> or in an iconoclastic stance claiming the death of God.<sup>100</sup> At this point, however, not only the old substantialistic mentality but also the new mentality will be on its guard with respect to a basic fact: a God

<sup>92</sup> See Benz (1961/3).

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Psalm 39:6; Isa 40:17. For the various texts of Christian and Vedantic Scholasticism, see, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *De Potentia* q.3, a.3, ad 4; Śaṅkara, BSBh VII.20.2–3.

<sup>94</sup> See, e.g., Karl Marx in so many of his typical expressions.

<sup>95</sup> See Fabro (1939).

<sup>96</sup> See Panikkar (1993/XXXIII) for an explanation of the significance of this cosmotheandric intuition.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, the familiar ten paintings of several Zen masters on "seeking the bull." There is a reproduction, with commentary, in Kapleau, *Three Pillars*, pp. 301–13. See also the splendid illustrated edition with comment by Enomiyama-Lassalle (1990).

<sup>98</sup> See J. A. T. Robinson (1963), p. 121.

<sup>99</sup> See the brilliant study by Dewart (1966), p. 139, with its almost desperate effort to de-Hellenize Christianity, beginning with its liberation from the equation God = being (which the author calls relative theism) in virtue of the fact that "God" is the reality *present* in all things and yet not exhausted by any of them. "The Christian God is not both transcendent and immanent. He is a reality *other* than being who is *present* to being (by which presence he makes being to be)" (ibid.).

<sup>100</sup> See Vahanian (1966), where the author makes the point that the "death of God" is a cultural phenomenon and cannot be erected as a new absolute.

who can be manipulated,<sup>101</sup> who can be bracketed,<sup>102</sup> is not the true God. Indeed, the Buddha would say that the true God is precisely the one who "is not."<sup>103</sup> If it is possible to live on the terms of a hypothesis of the denial of God, this is because there really is no such "God." Either the hypothesis is necessary, and then it cannot be done away with (in other words, it ceases to be a hypothesis); or it is not necessary, and then God ceases to be God, because God, by definition, is the one who cannot be done away with.<sup>104</sup> It may be that God is not a *hypostasis*, but in no case God is or can be a mere hypothesis.

Is there any escape from this apparent blind alley? Perhaps there could be some fusion (without confusion) with man on a deeper level in a discourse upon God in a secular mode,<sup>105</sup> a discourse that would divest God of the halo of absolutization, and transform Him, in personalistic fashion, into a meaningful factor only for those who recognize Him?<sup>106</sup> Perhaps then a creator God, ruler of all things and responsible also for our existence, will vanish from the human horizon, to reappear in the person of an Icon, an *iṣṭadevata*, a Redeemer, or a Love for those in need of support on the highway of life. And here we return again to Buddhism, which does not deny the presence of the gods, the *devas*, the God of the lowly, but surely rejects the God of the philosophers and theologians. It is probably here, then, that what certain recent Western theologians were seeking to express through the concept of the "death of God"<sup>107</sup> could find a more adequate formulation, if only we could manage to consider the merits of the Buddhist attitude, although Buddhism was the result of an intuition born out of a different experience, and living according to the parameters of a different mentality.

It is, however, significant that precisely the key interpreters of this modern theology spontaneously turned to an exploration of the spirituality of Buddhism, and of the East in general.<sup>108</sup> But we will be content with having mentioned the issue.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>101</sup> It is not for nothing that Descartes is considered the father of modern philosophy.

<sup>102</sup> See Bonhoeffer, as quoted by J. A. T. Robinson (1963), p. 38. Bonhoeffer insists on the old hypothesis: "Etsi Deus non daretur" [Even if there were no God]. It is interesting to recall that Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis* XI, sought, with the formula "etsi daretur Deum non esse," a kind of neutral ground where it would be possible for human life to develop without God as a necessary "hypothesis."

<sup>103</sup> "Die Religion der Flucht ist der Atheismus" [The religion of flight is atheism], writes Leeuw (1956), p. 679—an oversimplification, in my view. We could also say that "Die Religion der Zuflucht ist der Theismus" [The religion of reassurance is theism]. Lacroix (1968) even dared to define atheism as the claim to innocence.

<sup>104</sup> See, for example, the report on the Achilpa tribe in Spencer-Gillen (1927), p. 1:368. The sacred pole representing the *axis mundi* stands for the orientation of life, that which bestows meaning on life itself. Legend has it that the pole once broke in two, whereupon the tribe, after a period of aimless wandering, came to a place where they all collapsed on the spot and died. The elimination of the totem would mean chaos, the end of the world, and hence the end of human life on earth.

<sup>105</sup> See Cox (1965), pp. 241–68: "To Speak in a Secular Fashion of God."

<sup>106</sup> Consider the familiar observation that the answer to the question on God's existence is another question exploring the practical consequences of the answer for the questioner; if it did not affect his behavior, then the existence of God is unnecessary for that individual (a superfluous hypothesis). If, on the contrary, the inquirer's behavior would be affected, then that individual still has a personal "need" for God.

<sup>107</sup> For a comprehensive evaluation of the controversy, see Comstock (1966); Ogletree (1966).

<sup>108</sup> Altizer has dedicated a number of writings to Oriental spirituality, for example, his work on *nirvāṇa* (1964), his study on Eliade (1963/2), and *Oriental Mysticism* (1961). Other works by the same author on the subject in question are (1963/1; 1965; 1966).

<sup>109</sup> See Hamilton (1956; 1961; 1966); Altizer and Hamilton (1960); Buren (1963); Vahanian (1961; 1964; 1966); and, in a different direction, Sölle (1965).

Let us now move on to another characteristic of our time that probably contributed to the radicalization of modern atheism. This characteristic, which is both cause and effect of the great development of natural science, is what I have elsewhere called "functionalistic thinking," in contrast to predicative and substantial thinking. Science does not tell us, nor does it claim to tell us, what things are. It tells us only how they function.<sup>110</sup> And, in the wake of science, philosophy has followed this direction. A great deal of modern Western philosophy is functionalistic, and this new direction of thought has produced the new key concepts of human speculation: the historical dimension and evolutionary process of man. They both point in an antisubstantialistic direction. If man "is not yet" what he will evolve into, it is surely meaningless to speculate on his hypothetical being, since in the present he is still in the process of evolution (strictly speaking, man "is not") or, indeed, to speculate on his future state, seeing it is not yet formed and since no one can foretell, but only conjecture, what form he will take at the end of evolution (if indeed it makes any sense to speak of an "end" of evolution). As we have said elsewhere, Being has not only been considered a verb, but a future tense: being *is* what shall be.

Now, if functionalistic thinking can supplant substantialistic thinking with regard to the World and Man, there is no reason why it should not also attack the third point of the triad: God.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, as we shall see below, for many centuries now the mighty Fortress of God has been considered Substance, and consequently Being. Thus, functionalism (which, less wisely than the Buddha, was not content with keeping silence regarding matters that escape human comprehension, whether for or against, but was outspoken in denying the substantiality of God) ended up denying this third dimension also, perhaps sometimes beyond its original intentions. Being and substance, even Being and God, have been equated to the point that a denial of God's substantiality was regarded as tantamount to a denial of Being, hence any form of reality. And reality was equated with truth.<sup>112</sup>

An example is the celebrated *Atheismstreit* of the late eighteenth century in Europe and, particularly, in Germany. This dispute arose mainly from the proposition of an idealistic philosophy, especially that of Fichte, that God is not a substance.<sup>113</sup> For some, to deny God any substantiality could only lead to deny God altogether.

The second more successful step taken by the functionalistic mentality was that of simply ignoring altogether the problem, and instead of wondering who God "is" (which seemed a useless question), concentrated all its interest on seeking to know His works and functions. As the World first, and man later, now God also finds a space only and essentially for whatever function He might still have, for its "usefulness" only. In order to be accepted, the Divine must justify His own presence no longer through what He *is* but through what He *is good at*. The traditional proofs of the *existence* of God are now deprived of all relevancy, so that, in order to justify a continuing need for God, some apologists, failing to find an appropriate language for the new situation, were forced to employ the classic "proofs" no longer to demonstrate

<sup>110</sup> See Rombach (1966) as an example of work focusing on directions rarely taken today and also Panikkar (2005/LIV).

<sup>111</sup> It is instructive to observe the contemporary developments of the process philosophy of Whitehead and his school, together with its application to the study of comparative religion. See, for example, Cobb (1975) for a Christological application and Cousins (1971) in general.

<sup>112</sup> The cause lies in "der Beirung des menschlichen Denkens durch die Kategorie der Substanz" [in the deviation of human thought due to the category of substance], writes Baumgartner (1963), p. 48. "Die 'substanz' ist aber keine Seins, sondern eine Denknöwendigkeit" [Substance is in no way a need of Being, but a need of thought], writes Ebner (1963), p. 135.

<sup>113</sup> See Gulgya (1962); Weischedel (1975), pp. 1:223–30, for a good summary.



the existence of the divine Being, but to justify His acts and thus make some room for Him in the contemporary mentality.

However, the attempt does not seem to have been very successful. The old "proofs" were distorted, and nothing was proved. After all, God cannot "justify" God's own presence by demonstrating a practical need for God.<sup>114</sup> The very fact that God can be subjected to discussion, or that apologists must justify God, means that this God has already ceased to exist, even for His defenders. The two principal justifications for the "proofs" of the existence of God are devoid of convincing power today: Divine Providence has been unable to protect the human race from evil and its own sin, and the "hypothesis" of God as the cause of phenomena as yet unknown has long since vanished. On the other hand, what the Thomist "proofs" were trying to prove was not the "existence" of Him that is already "being called God by all," but the rationality of such belief.

Christian apologetics have understood the stakes and strived to "save" God both from the bankruptcy of all values and from all possible conflict with science.<sup>115</sup> The lesson of the Galileo affair has not been lost on the champions of God, and adequate care has been taken to avoid its recurrence.<sup>116</sup> The result is that we find ourselves spectators of an actual "demythologizing rush"—a rush to clean the field of God from anything not strictly religious, that the Divine may forthwith throne on heights so inaccessible that no future science will be able to reach up and pull it down. God, the Supreme Being, withdraws once more into pure transcendence, and leaves the world to man's wrangling.<sup>117</sup> In a word, the apologists would build for God one last refuge: the very top of the pyramid of Being, which Man can reach only through faith or death.

And yet the modern mentality seeks to dislodge God from this last bulwark also, although with contradictory intentions; some of the launchers of this final assault seek to deal "myth" a final blow and thus "liberate" man from it once and for all, while others strive to deeply "purify" God Himself.<sup>118</sup> Some modern human beings, moreover, finally burned God at the stake and took over His functions wherever mere earthly existence was concerned.

Yet soon enough these atheists realized that their existence, perhaps indeed their very "being," was not exhausted in the sphere of the merely mundane. The enhancement of the quality of life, the attainment of the visible and the concrete, often appear to them as intrinsically insufficient to live life in fullness. Man also needs another "salvation," one that will sink its very roots deep into the invisible dimension of human nature.

<sup>114</sup> "Et hoc est quod omnes appellant Deum" [And this is what all call God], says Thomas Aquinas, concluding his own proofs. He had proved (on his premises) the existence of the *hoc*, but the problem today consists precisely in the identification of this metacosmological *hoc* with the theological God.

<sup>115</sup> See Küng (1978).

<sup>116</sup> Although the problem was another, the case of Galileo was repeatedly cited in the conflict between Hans Küng and the Roman Church (1979–1980). In 1982 John Paul II recognized the error committed by the Church, although new cases have arisen, such as Drewermann's.

<sup>117</sup> See Qo 3:11 in the Vulgate.

<sup>118</sup> Without any Buddhist contamination, Lacroix (1954), pp. 61–62 (with the ensuing discussion), arrives at a practical conclusion: "Peut-être serait-il possible de trouver ici une application pratique à la distinction . . . entre la représentation et la visée: le témoignage ne peut être absent, mais c'est parfois jusque dans le silence des mots et des gestes que doit se manifester, plus lumineusement que jamais, sa présence" [Perhaps it would be possible to find here a practical application of the distinction between *representation* and *aim*: testimony cannot be wanting, but there are times that (Christ's) presence ought to be manifested more luminously than ever in the silence of words and deeds].

If Buddhism has eliminated God from the way of salvation, radically transforming the conception of the Ultimate, could modern atheism perhaps find here a new orientation?<sup>119</sup>

### Ontological Apophatism

That God may have no name, that He may be ineffable, unspeakable (*innominabile*), and also have all names (*omninominabile*), as Meister Eckhart paradoxically said, is almost a constant element in the history of human thought. Clement of Alexandria attributes to the God of Aristotle the epithet of *ἀκατονόμαστον* (*vacans nomine*). Philo and others also seem to speculate on this name, as does, for example, Cicero himself.<sup>120</sup> Apophatism is common.

The fact that God has no name is certainly a much graver proposition to traditional ears than to modern ears, for which the name is little more than a label. It is well known that, traditionally speaking, revealing the name is akin to revealing the thing itself.<sup>121</sup>

### *The Buddha's Stance*

"While I meditate, should I avoid dwelling on any idea?" the disciple asked his Zen master. "Forget that idea," the master replied. "What idea?" asked the disciple, perplexed. "It is an idea you may keep" [to think it best not to dwell on any ideas as well as doubting even this stance], answered the master.

It is related of Chao-chou, another great Zen master, that when a monk once asked him, "What is the last word on truth?" he simply replied, "Yes"—whereupon the disciple, thinking that the master had not understood, repeated the question. And Chao-chou, feigning anger, boomed back at him: "Do you suppose I am deaf?"<sup>122</sup>

Something rather similar is occurring in modern civilization. Though born into this civilization, and conditioned by technology, man still feels impelled to wonder about life's ultimate problems. However, if we may reapply the meaning of the Zen teachings hinted at in the two examples just presented, the answers given by traditional teachers today seem to be as meaningless, not to say annoying, as the questions the disciples asked their Zen masters. Man has lost confidence in "whatever" has customarily been called "God," and so finds it annoying and meaningless to have to repeatedly hear that the final answer belongs precisely to that God. After all, if, as we have seen in the preceding section, God no longer has the "power" to be the support of many people who consider themselves "modern," then God can no longer be foisted upon us as the one and only solution to every need. "God is a private, subjective matter," we have learned to say. No longer, then, can God claim to legislate an "objectively" ethical behavior.

The Zen answers are liberating because they deconstruct the presupposition of a God as solution to everything. As the Vedas say, the name of God is *Ka?* (Who?)<sup>123</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Tillich adopted, although in a somewhat different context, the old medieval and mystical conception of "God above God" and "God beyond God." See Tillich (1955/2), p. 186.

<sup>120</sup> See Wolfson (1964), pp. 85ff., for pertinent references.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Castelli (1969).

<sup>122</sup> The two quotations are taken, respectively, from Neill (1961), p. 114, and K. S. Murti (1960), pp. 23–24.

<sup>123</sup> RV X.121 and *passim*.

And yet does it really seem wise to break with a (religious) tradition that for centuries, for better or for worse, has furnished a large part of humanity with effective support? Indeed, have we not begun to see that the drastic solution, tested several times now in the course of history, of discarding traditional religions, does not seem to have yielded very satisfactory results? On the contrary, it almost seems as if the "place" vacated by God has been filled by . . . nothing at all—and that this "nothing" has loomed up before an unprepared modern man with a force that terrorizes him and threatens to swallow him. The silence that filled the void left by the disappearing divine figure seems even more disappointing and incomprehensible than the God who was to be wished away. But we shall return to this issue later.

What now appears advisable and perhaps urgent is a respectful renewal of tradition itself with no solution of continuity. After all, even a superficial glance at history shows us that no great, enduring spiritual revolution, not even that great upheaval of the sixth century, totally broke away with the past, and also that a mature, balanced solution to vital problems has been possible through a wise fusion of the *nova et vetera*<sup>124</sup> present in every culture.

Thus, if we now return to the message the Buddha preached twenty-five centuries ago, it is not out of some attachment to anachronism, or apologetic desire: it is because we perceive in it an indispensable element for contemporary spirituality. Both cultures, the modern, of Western mold, and the Buddhist, are atheistic. Their attitude toward the ultimate questions of reality is apophatic. Western apophatism may be of a more epistemological character, whereas Buddhism, as we have seen, acquires its full meaning on the ontological level, so that the encounter of both may be of great help in the search for a new identity of contemporary man.

Indeed, the position that I have advanced in the foregoing chapters concerning the fundamental position taken by the Buddha with respect to ultimate problems could be defined as ontological apophatism. If his message were to be reduced to an epistemological interpretation of this concept, then of course we would have nothing "new" to contribute to the resolution of the current problematic. That ultimate reality is ineffable and that man may only approach it without penetrating its mystery in its "essence," incapable of expressing adequately what reality is; that "nescience" must be regarded as the supreme knowledge; that, in short, epistemological apophatism is the ultimate human possibility, and so on, are all formulations that are in no way exclusive to Buddhism. Nearly all of humanity's religious and philosophical traditions contain this same emphasis, in varying degrees.<sup>125</sup> Yet Buddhism goes beyond: its ontological reduction concerns not only the object of philosophical reflection but the very subject of philosophy.<sup>126</sup>

Let me present this problem in the classic terminology of the Indic philosophies. Human philosophical tendencies can be divided into two great currents, the orthodox systems or *astikas*, and the heterodox systems or *nāstikas*, in accordance with their respective attitudes toward "Being" and hence the different directions taken by their philosophizing. The *astikas* journey toward the transcendent in their quest of reality, and address reality itself as the *object* of their reflection. As their investigation proceeds, however, they ultimately fail to find a formula that would satisfy, comprehend, or express this "object" that in the end dissolves in the very light of knowledge. "Being" in the long run reveals itself to be ineffable,

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Mt 13:52.

<sup>125</sup> For the traditional Christian position, see Journet (1948).

<sup>126</sup> This was the theme of my course in the philosophy of religion at the University of Rome (academic year 1965–1966): "The overcoming of Being in Hinduism and Buddhism."

transcendent, unknowable, beyond all determination. The *astikas* thus reach the conclusion that the object of their investigation has been lost along the way, which opens the door to the reform proposed by their opponents.

It is also meaningful to observe that, both in antiquity and today, the philosophical systems opposing Being are born out of a reaction against the traditions of Being and are generally considered heterodox—and end up being gradually reabsorbed—although they may have been successful for many centuries. In India, for example, Buddhism has disappeared almost completely and has been reabsorbed partly by Śaṅkara's reform, while in Mahāyāna it has almost become theist. Christianity, that for several centuries was considered as an "atheistic" reformation because it fought the traditional gods, also gradually became "theistic" as its reform took shape. The materialist and Marxist contemporary trends are still too recent to imagine their assimilation in a more "essentialistic" ideology. It seems that on all sides the longing for Being reappears.

The *nāstikas* systems, on the other hand—Buddhism in particular—move in the opposite direction, addressing the immanent. Inasmuch as Being is not found in the transcendent, since as such it does not admit any expression, the *nāstikas* turn their consideration to the immanent—the concrete reality (in that it is available to the senses) of the thinking *subject*. But they come in a parallel way to a similar conclusion: the *subject* also has been lost along the way. That is to say, even an immanent being, hence the human being as such, does not exist, has no foundation, offers no resistance to impermanence; it is not, it has no pretense to being defined, delimited. In stepping beyond delimitation it has fallen . . . nowhere, into nothingness, if you wish; strictly speaking, it cannot be said to have fallen, since in order to fall it would have had to go beyond itself and overleap its own shadow, which is absolutely impossible. Man—mortal, impermanent "being"—belongs to the sphere of contingency and, consequently, whatever he is capable of doing, thinking, obtaining, and even being, belongs irremediably to this sphere, which must be overcome, if at all, without any external point of reference, and without leaving any traces: leaping as it were into Nothingness.

To put it differently: the essential, or essentialistic, incursion of the *astika* philosophies, which investigate *what* things are and, consequently, centers the whole philosophical problematic on the quest for Being (and that includes identity), corresponds to the existential, or existentialist, *nāstika* incursion, which limits itself to seeking *how* one reaches the goal, the end.

Naturally, the essentialists, engaged as they are in an investigation of Being, will find it difficult to accept the existentialist position; indeed, they will not even succeed in understanding how it might be possible to indicate a *how*, without first knowing *what* one seeks to reach. It is at this point that Buddhism can enter the picture, with its reply that the need for such previous knowledge (the "what"), whether valid or not within the narrow scope of intra-mundane speculation, certainly is not relevant for spiritual life.

Strictly speaking, both currents concern an ultimate attitude and therefore lack a foundation. The claim to be able to move toward a goal is just as gratuitous as the Buddha's invitation to follow a road with no describable *telos*. Yet the Buddhist position does at least have in its favor not only common sense (as may be seen in the parable of the arrow) but the very fact that the vast majority of individuals normally live in the sphere of the existential and not in that of the essential. Furthermore, the Buddha will say that action need not depend on or proceed from theory, not only because in practice this would entail exclusion from reaching the goal for the majority of humanity (which would then have to settle for the *how* indicated by "those who know"), but mostly because anything we may know and say of the "goal" would mean reducing it to the limited parameters of the intra-mundane, and hence converting it

into something finite. If the "goal" could be known when we are still short of it, when we remain in contingency, this would mean for the Buddha that the goal belongs to the same contingency, so that in reaching it one would not emerge from limitation (something similar is stated by Nāgārjuna). If the goal is really "beyond," however, how can one know what it is beforehand? After all, when it is reached, nothing else is any longer of any importance. The interest of the Awakened One, as we have seen, is concentrated on the fact that the *ultimate* end, by definition, cannot be known before being reached.

But there is more. Buddhism actually goes further than the functionalists. First of all, the distinction between the recognition of an existence and the cognition of its essence, besides being the fruit of a given metaphysics, is not relevant to our case. To the objection that it will be sufficient to know that a goal *exists*, without thereby necessarily knowing what it *is*,<sup>127</sup> Buddhism answers that if essence is categorically separated from existence, if we admit that a goal *exists*, this does not necessarily mean that this goal *is* (indeed, it may well be "nothing," since we cannot attribute to "nothingness" the category of being); on the other hand, if we say that essence and existence cannot be separated (and we do this when we posit that the goal not only *exists* but *is*, which is impossible to know before reaching it), we are not really considering essence at all.

But, it will be objected, it is one thing to reach an object through knowledge and something quite different to arrive at it in reality. To this, Buddhism, rending its garments at the epistemological blasphemy, will reply that a cognition that were not to be real could not be called true knowledge, and that the only guarantee derives from experience—in this case, from the experience of having arrived at the goal. But the problem lies not so much with the dialectical discussion as with the deepest religious intuition of reality.

For Buddhism, "to be" is a verb, not a substantive; things *are*, by being, but there is no "being" (*esse*) that sustains them, and "makes" them be. To speak of "being" as a substantive is to murder it, inasmuch as a being that claims to be without being, a being that does not abide in being, a being exiled from being (verb), such would no longer be being; it is not, it has perished, it has died; it "was," it "has been," but it is no longer; it is a mere *state*. To be is to be transient, to be transitive, it is really *being*, that is, becoming, arriving at being in this instant, ceasing at once to be "what" has been, since it has to give way to the continuation of being. To be is to *ek-sist*. There is no such thing as "being" according to the mode of existence of things. Things *are*, but they are not "beings." Being is not a predicate. Neither is it a subject.

Returning to the classic formula "A is B," the Buddhist intuition will retain the simple copula. If "A is B," B determines A to such an extent (in order to be really B) that A loses its own identity, to be petrified in B—it ceases to be what it "is" (what it was, we should say, for clarity's sake); it ceases to be A to be transformed into B. But neither can we simply say that "A is," for then A itself will stem the fluidity, the truth of "is" as a verb. And, we might add, paradoxically, that no A could match "is." After all, "is" has neither subject nor predicate. Things are inasmuch as they pass, decline, or grow, inasmuch as they transit and cease to "be" in order to continue to be. Things are not as far as being (*esse*) is concerned, but they are because they *are*, inasmuch as, in becoming, they cease to be in order to continue to be. To be is to pass through existence.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>127</sup> It was Plotinus (*Enneade* V.5.6) who significantly recognized the possibility of knowing that a thing exists without knowing what it is.

<sup>128</sup> See Meister Eckhart's concept of humankind as an adverb (*biwort*) of the verb (*wort*), and not as *esse*. Rather than an *ad-esse*, man would be an *ad-verbum*. E.g., "Sant Iohannes sprach 'in dem

As long as these cogitations remain on the level of philosophical formulation, they may be more or less comprehensible, perhaps even acceptable. The scandal arises when we touch on what more than one tradition regards as Being par excellence: God.<sup>129</sup> This is the problem to which we shall devote the largest section of our study.

### *The Current Problematic*

The identification between God and Being is not a universally recognized axiom. Not only will a certain contemporary atheism deny God (disallowing God's monopoly on Being, without thereby denying Being); but from an opposite standpoint there are, and have been, many religions which, while accepting God without discussion, do not identify Him with Being. Hence we must confront the problem from these two angles:

1. The convergence of God and Being; the divinization of Being.
2. The divergence of God and Being; the deontologization of God.

The problem should not be treated lightly. After all, on the answer hangs the fate not only of a broad area of philosophical thought, but also of many religions—particularly Christianity, so profoundly compromised with this equation God = Being, for which it appears to be largely responsible.<sup>130</sup>

One thing seems beyond doubt: in the West the problem arose with the appearance of the first Greek philosophical activity in the sixth century BC. Once the first philosophers turned their attention to discovering the foundation, initial or ultimate, of reality, and began to seek out a possible unity beyond concrete, transitory multiplicity, the adventure of Being began—and almost at once came into conflict with Divinities already existing.<sup>131</sup>

The history of human thought seems to me to lead to an exclusive choice between divinizing Being or deontologizing the Divine. It does not appear that God and Being can be supreme each in its own sphere. There seems to be no third alternative, and the struggle is to the death. Either God and Being are identified, with the divinization of Being or the ontologization of the Divine, or else one slays the other, so that only Being without God or God without Being remains.

However, both solutions presuppose God and Being as pillars of reality. Will Buddhism perhaps tell us that both must be destroyed—that there is no Being precisely because there is no God and no God because there is simply no Being?

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anew was daz wort,' un meinest, daz man bi dem worte si ein biwort" [Saint John affirms, "In the beginning was the verb," and means that humankind in the presence of the verb was its adverb] (Eckhart [1958], DW 1:155).

<sup>129</sup> Cf. the similar "orthodox," or even the collective feeling attitudes of Renaissance Europe with regard to Copernicus's formulas, or Bruno's or Galileo's. As long as the intuition remained in the form of a theoretical, mathematical formula, it was accepted. When it came to applying it to the real, observable universe, it was condemned.

<sup>130</sup> "C'est seulement dans le Christianisme et la spéculation qu'il engendra que se produisit enfin la rencontre et qu'une alliance durable fut scellée entre l'Être de la philosophie et le Dieu de la religion" [It was only in Christianity and the speculation it engendered that an encounter was finally produced, and a lasting covenant struck, between the Being of philosophy and the God of religion], says Gilson (1962), p. 194, in his brilliant and profound study.

<sup>131</sup> See, for example, Jaeger (1953), pp. 55ff., as well as Caird (1958).

Let us now take up the analysis of the problematic outlined above.

If we proceed from *logos* to *mythos*—that is, if we begin “philosophically” with Being—sooner or later we shall inevitably run into Gods or into God and shall have to make room for them in our ontology. But since God will not take second place on the ladder of beings, one way or another He shall clear a path to reach Being.

Likewise, if we proceed from *mythos* to *logos*—that is, if we begin “mythically” with God—the problem of Being will appear when this God is faced with the World and must clarify his relationship with it. Here identification will not be so immediately and dialectically necessary as it was in the previous case, but in one way or another God will claim dominion over beings, not acknowledging any superior instance that is not itself Divine. A particular God may escape identification with Being, but once a divine hierarchy and a ladder of being are established, the twin pinnacles will inevitably strike a relationship so intimate as to inevitably turn into identity.<sup>132</sup>

In short, this could be the destiny of Western thought. When brought to the extreme, ontology and theology will inevitably coincide. Now our present age has suddenly cast doubt upon the very identification that has cost the West so many centuries of speculation and “progress,” and the challenge to such conquest, moreover, comes from the West itself, and from the heirs of the very Christianity whose proudest boast has been the unequivocal consolidation of the union of the twin cusps.

It has not always been so. Even a philosophy as elaborately developed as that of Plato refrained from such an identification—and without needing to label it or its author as atheistic. And so is it possible today to return to a God who would have no affinity with thinking (admitting that thinking is organic to Being), or can we only move on and abandon a God who has usurped the throne of Being for centuries?<sup>133</sup> Here our speculation will have to adopt a culturally and religiously pluralistic outlook if we hope to find paths to a solution of the problem we face. The challenge of the present age will be to examine whether it is possible to “dedivinize” Being, and deontologize God, without either one suffering any detriment, so to speak. Apart from such a possibility, only one alternative remains: identification or the prevailing of one over the other.

### *The Convergence of God and Being: Divinization of Being*

An equation of God with Being can scarcely be essential where a religious God is concerned. After all, not only the so-called ethnic or national religions do not consider God as Being, but even in the vast majority of the so-called higher religions, such an identification is certainly not an indispensable essential characteristic of the Divine they worship.

<sup>132</sup> See the exciting problem long since posed by Xenophanes. Texts and discussion in Jaeger (1953), pp. 55ff.

<sup>133</sup> With his usual energy, Heidegger, the contemporary philosopher who was able to restate the question from a philosophical perspective, says, “Wer die Theologie, sowohl diejenige des christlichen Glaubens als auch diejenige der Philosophie, aus gewachsener Herkunft erfahren hat, zieht es heute vor, im Bereich des Denkens von Gott zu schweigen. Denn der ontotheologische Charakter der Metaphysik ist für das Denken fragwürdig geworden, nicht auf Grund irgendeines Atheismus [He who has experienced theology, from its origin, whether that of the Christian faith or that of philosophy, prefers to keep silence about God in the domain of thought. As a fact, the ontotheological character of metaphysics has become problematic for thinking, and not owing to any sort of atheism] (Heidegger [1957], p. 45).

A fascinating history, yet to be written, might retrace how and when the divinization of Being occurred.<sup>134</sup> But this is not our intention.<sup>135</sup> I shall be content to summarize the general stages of this process after the fashion of a drama in three acts:

1. Anthropomorphism
2. Onp morphology
3. Personalism

Needless to say, I do not visualize these three "acts" either as an ideal historical sequence, nor as three necessary parts of a dialectical process, but rather as the threefold dimension inherent to the problem of Man's relationship with God. A solution to the problem can be envisioned in the compact intertwining of all three components of the drama—provided we can raise all three directions of human thought to their respective melting points and thus permit their harmonious combination, without contradictions and without artificial syncretisms. Finally, let me add that the present approach will be philosophical rather than exclusively historical and religious.

We would rather set in relief the aspects of human philosophical and religious experiences that we consider most relevant. Because they are aspects rather than concrete entities, these three "acts" will often be contemporaneous, in a kairological sense, and will often subsist within one and the same religion and in the character of a single Divinity.

Let us now turn to our drama.

### *Anthropomorphism*

This first act represents human-divine relationships in their reciprocal similarity. God has created man "in his image and likeness."<sup>136</sup> Philosophically it will rather be said that man has represented God in his own image. One of the basic traits of the God of religions is personality.<sup>137</sup> First and foremost, God is always a *someone*. God may be the personification of a natural force or phenomenon, or the projection of a human attribute, or of extraordinary virtue, but always and everywhere God is a *someone* loved or feared, someone who metes out reward or punishment, someone who creates (or cannot create), someone who can be subject to other Gods or to a higher law or who may be the Lord of such cosmic law, and so on. However it may be, the Divine is invariably a "someone" who permits the series of personal relationships pertaining to religious life: sacrifice, prayer (in its various forms—worship, praise, petition, invocation, etc.), consecration, love, and so forth.

<sup>134</sup> See Gilson (1962), pp. 181–202, 398–416.

<sup>135</sup> The question has been posed thematically in our days: "Wie kommt der Gott in die Philosophie, nicht nur in die neuzeitliche, sondern in die Philosophie als solche" [How does God fit into philosophy? And not only into contemporary philosophy, but in philosophy as such?] (Heidegger [1957], p. 46). For a good critical study of Heideggerian exegesis, see Schuwer (1961). The two volumes by Weischedel (1975) are very useful in understanding Western and philosophical issues. See, in particular, his chapter "Gott als das Vonwoher der Fraglichkeit" [God as the where-from of questionability, or, more simply, God as the origin of the possibility of questioning], p. 184ff.

<sup>136</sup> See Gen 1:26–27 as one example among many of the kinship and likeness between God and man that many religions emphatically highlight. Man is formed, on the one hand, of earth, and on the other, of the blood of the Gods. God is "father of mortals," etc. See the materials and examples in Kristensen (1960), pp. 239–53.

<sup>137</sup> To be distinguished from the personalism of the third stage, which we shall consider later on.



Let me repeat that I am using the concept of anthropomorphism in its strictly anthropological sense and not in the sense introduced by a certain approach to the history of religions in order to characterize what it considers to be a first religious typology, the so-called ethnic and national religions. I am not referring, then, only to a merely "physical" anthropomorphism, as with the Greek Gods, or merely to a "psychic" anthropomorphism, as with the God of Israel, though neither of these two aspects should be excluded. I would just like to highlight the constitutive anthropomorphic ("similar to man") character any God must have who intends to be a God to man.

Without entering now into superfluous descriptions, let us simply recall that to this category belong, not only all the Divinities that, from prehistoric times until today, have been represented in images,<sup>138</sup> but also the Divinities that belong to a more profound and elaborated degree of "revelation," such as, for example, the YHWH of prophetic reform,<sup>139</sup> or the highly idealized Prajapati of the Vedas.<sup>140</sup> These are eminently personal Gods. They are persons.<sup>141</sup> And, indeed, a God to whom one could not pray, a God to whom one could not turn either directly or indirectly, a God who would not in some fashion intervene in human affairs, is not God. God—that is, the God of religions—is always a God of men and for men. *Brahman* strictly speaking is not God, and neither is Aristotle's Motionless Engine God. "Increase his prestige" as you may, let the divine perfections and attributes be elevated to the infinite, God must always maintain a bond with man that will permit the exercise of His function as God. In a word, God is always the Lord.

The main path toward this God is the ritual path of sacrifice, which in time, and with the growth of man's importance and of his world, becomes the path of deed and action. This is the *karmamarga* of the Indic tradition—the existential, concrete, human, historical, personal path.

The personal Divinity takes part in this act of our drama even when it assumes more highly developed theological and philosophical characteristics, such as transcendence vis-à-vis man and human nature, a transcendence that, on this level, is implicit in God's personality, and has no need of defense or theological demonstration.

Moreover, there is another characteristic belonging to this first stage—a characteristic that appears later in history, and only as the fruit of the theological reflection. I am referring to the divine otherness. God is essentially the Other, the One who is always "outside," "above," "beyond," who is independent, unmixed, sacred, separated, "holy," abiding in transcendence, in lordship, and in sublimity in the realms of the numinous. God alone is good;<sup>142</sup> the Gods are always pure.<sup>143</sup> God is God inasmuch as we are men. Our relationship with Him (through sacrifice and works, including moral action and deeds of mercy), represents the most profound nexus that could ever be: it is the complementary relationship par excellence, for God has all that we lack.

To put it another way: the concept, or the experience, that we have of God or the Gods, in this first act of our drama, is that of the purified, sublimated (in varying degrees, according

<sup>138</sup> Theriomorphism as well, which bestows on the Divinity an animal form rather than a human one (anthropomorphism), is basically an anthropomorphic way of expressing the extra-human.

<sup>139</sup> See Cross (1961), pp. 225–59; Hyatt (1967), pp. 369–77.

<sup>140</sup> See Panikkar (1977/XXV); Lévi (1966), pp. 24ff.

<sup>141</sup> Notice that we are not speaking of personification, but of the originally personal character of the Gods of religions. "Es gibt keine Personifikation, sondern nur eine Entpersonifizierung" [There is no personification, but only a depersonification], W. F. Otto rightly observes (1962), p. 261.

<sup>142</sup> See Mt 19:17; Mk 10:18; Lk 18:19.

<sup>143</sup> *Sada devah arepasah*, SV 442.

to the culture) personalization of what man is, of what he has, of what he desires or of what he lacks. I shall not enter into a discussion here on the origin of the several characteristics of God, nor on their gradual manifestation in human consciousness through the course of history. What is of interest here is that, in one form or other, the personal character is always present.

In this first stage, God is always the Lord of man, He is Other in respect to man; He is man's Creator, Protector, Remunerator, and whatever else. Such anthropomorphic traits will, of course, be refined and purified according to the degree of philosophical and cultural differentiation of each given situation, but in the end God is always divinized Man.

Let it be very clear that I am not only saying that man cannot help but represent God anthropomorphically. I am also saying that the God Himself has no other way of revealing Himself to man than in an anthropomorphic manner, regardless of the degree of perfection a given spirituality has attained. Anthropomorphism is a radical necessity of any human experience, even the experience of the Divine. If the point of reference is lost, if the subject "man" of experience disappears, then God also vanishes.<sup>144</sup> This is precisely what occurs in Buddhism. But let us proceed with order.

We must not forget that, since man has need of a concept, an idea, an experience of God, this concept, experience, and so on can only be the fruit of a human act. Even if the very Divinity reveals itself, it has to accommodate the human receptacle—and therefore it cannot but present, to one degree or another, an anthropomorphic character.

The personal character of God is further accentuated by the fact that each individual divinity is worshipped and invoked under a proper name. In classical Greek, for example, only the proper names of the divinities—Zeus, Apollo, Heracles, and so on—have a vocative case form. On the other hand, these nouns do not have, nor can they have, a plural form. Proper names are in the singular: each denotes a given personality that as such is unique. *Theos*<sup>145</sup> is simply a common noun, denoting an event, a divine fact.<sup>146</sup>

With the spread of Christianity, this generic term—originated in a "polytheistic" context—was used to designate, in the Greek and Latin translation (*theos, deus*), the Father of Jesus of Nazareth. This is highly significant. In the Hebrew Scripture, God is still given a proper name—YHWH, a designation carrying a personalistic connotation. Yet the word adopted by Christianity to designate the Father of Jesus is none other than the generic word "God," thereby accentuating universality at the expense of personality (and possibly unicity). In other words, the name used by Christianity to designate God in no way strengthens the defined personalistic aspect of the Divinity. Rather it sets in relief the dynamism of a divine event. Eventually this divine event came to be considered so unique and special<sup>147</sup> that the common noun "God" acquired the status of a proper name designating God by *anonomasia*.<sup>148</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Ecstasy rightly connotes the loss of the subject—the sole condition for being able to "see" God "as God is." But then it is no longer "man" seeing Him.

<sup>145</sup> See the authority of Wilamowitz-Mollendorf, in Kerényi (1961), p. 39. As such, it did not have a vocative case.

<sup>146</sup> See the argumentation in Kerényi (1963) in its original version: "Der Inhalt des griechischen Wortes *theos* ist nun klar; er ist wie *ecce deus*. Die gleiche Aussage mit Artikel  $\delta$  θεός meint in einen kultischen Kontext *illud deum*, den man aus seinen Ereignissen kennt. . . . Der Inhalt des Wortes *theos* sei 'göttliches Ereignis' [The content of the Greek word *theos* is clear: *ecce deus*. The same expression with the article  $\delta$  θεός means, in a context of worship, *illud deum*, the god known by its effects. . . . The content of the word *theos* is "divine event"] (p. 34).

<sup>147</sup> See, for example, Jn 1:14.

<sup>148</sup> See K. Rahner (1954), p. 143, with the fine distinction between θεός (God) and  $\delta$  θεός (the Father). The whole essay deserves reading.

This fact belongs to the peculiar and today problematic character of the Christian God as such. This "God" has become, on one hand, the God of religion who through personalization has acquired a vocative; on the other hand, however, his initial indetermination opened the door to the philosophical influences that would slowly but steadily substantialize God. In this way, the concept increased its ontological consistency, as perhaps it also decreased its religious strength, so that God needs Christ as a personal mediator between God and man.

### *Ontomorphism*

The curtain rises on the second act. We find several human traditions here. This moment opens roughly in the sixth century BC and reaches its climax in its most complete formulation at around the first millennium of our era.

Act 2 owes its origin to the assiduous effort of the human intellect to purify the concept of God—to deanthropomorphize God. The result of the process will be that the notion of God will acquire a growing metaphysical consistency, ultimately turning God into Being. In this new intellectual perspective, in order really to be able to exercise functions in a divine fashion, God can no longer act from without, as "other," as if God were but one more human being, albeit a superior one to whom obedience is owed. For God to be able truly to be God, this new antianthropomorphic mentality will demand that God cease to be "other" and become interiorized, so that God's every action will not be antinatural but act on the inner intimacy of all things.<sup>149</sup>

This process toward immanence is how God begins to be transformed into Being. We observe such process in a highly developed form in the Upaniṣads, which finally lead traditional, anthropomorphic Vedic religion to the highest degree of rarefaction and sublimation of the Divine. However, this process had no influence on the formation of a specific equation God = Being, which has led, even if only in the form of reaction, to Western secularization. We will therefore leave aside the Indic phenomenon and concentrate our attention on developments in the West.

We have a fascinating example when, after Plato's purification of metaphysics and his elaboration of the idea of Good (howbeit not considered as "God" or "Being"),<sup>150</sup> Aristotle declares that prime substances are Divinities,<sup>151</sup> opening thus the door to the identification of God and Being.<sup>152</sup> As we know, this is the route later taken by the philosophers of the new Western religions, who brought the process to its culmination in that Christian scholasticism that sought inspiration in the Stagirite.

A verification of the depth to which this union of the God of religion with the philosophical God penetrated the consciousness and systems of his theologians is found in the metaphysical hermeneutics of the name YHWH. Initially, the name revealed to Moses<sup>153</sup> had no connection per se with the Being of the philosophers.<sup>154</sup> It is significant, then, that the

<sup>149</sup> Augustine's propositions (*Confessiones* III.6.11) on God as "intimior intimo meo" [more intimate than my innermost] are well known, as are those of Thomas Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* I.q.8 and q.105). Eckhart, Calvin, etc. See Panikkar (1971/XII), pp. 213ff., for other quotations.

<sup>150</sup> For Plato also, the idea of the Good is found "beyond Being" (ἐκτέτατα τῆς οὐσίας), *Republica* 509B.

<sup>151</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysica* XII.8 (1704b1).

<sup>152</sup> See Gilson (1962), pp. 189ff.

<sup>153</sup> Ex 3:14.

<sup>154</sup> See Panikkar (1967/VIII), pp. 67–68, presenting four biblical meanings of Ex 3:14: supratemporal, exclusivity, presence, and personality. (Yet nowhere is the God of Moses presented as Being.)

rapprochement—indeed, the identification—of the twin cusps, God and Being, eventually came to be seen in the proper name of God, YHWH, interpreted as to denote precisely Being.<sup>155</sup>

Despite the fact that other considerations in the interpretation of the divine name in the Exodus text are far from confirming an identification of God with philosophical Being, it is certain that no Western Christian or post-Christian metaphysics has been able to avoid this identification, whether to accept, deny, or transcend it. Today Christian theology is conscious of this.<sup>156</sup> The whole problem of so-called Christian philosophy relates to this equation.<sup>157</sup>

Our era will certainly seek other ways. A well-known "modern" interpretation that sees in the Exodus passage the revelation of God as future, as absolute Future, is, "I am He who shall be."<sup>158</sup> God is not because humankind is-not-yet. God is presented as the human fulfillment, infinitely transcending, and yet neither heterogeneous nor extraneous to human nature.<sup>159</sup> Another interpretation, claiming greater exegetical precision, sustains that a correct translation of the divine name would emphasize not the "being," but the "actualizing," of YHWH: the object of revelation is not so much his being, but concerns his salvific action.<sup>160</sup>

As we see, each interpretation drinks at its own well, seeking to decipher elements in the revealed name that will lend support to its own theory. When the prevailing philosophy exalted Being, the name of God could do nothing but reflect his own being. When philosophy focuses on the future, and on action, what is perceived is the temporality and activity of God. But since the discovery of the dynamism inherent in the divine name is still too recent to have overcome the inveterate habit of substantialization, the common tendency continues to be to interpret the future as the place of the epiphany of divine Being, and to commonly

<sup>155</sup> See Gilson (1962), pp. 189ff.

<sup>156</sup> For the exegesis of the Exodus passage, see, among other studies, Dubarle (1951); also Lambert (1952).

<sup>157</sup> See the effort of Tresmontant (1961).

<sup>158</sup> We have bracketed "modern" interpretation because as far back as in 1574, from prison, Brother Luis de León wrote in *Los nombres de Cristo* (Salamanca 1583), translating Ex 3:14 as follows: "El que será, será, será; repitiendo esta palabra de tiempo futuro tres veces, y como diciéndoles: Yo soy el que prometí a vuestros padres venir ahora para librarlos de Egipto, y nacer después entre vosotros para redimirlos del pecado, y tornar últimamente en la misma forma de hombre para destruir la muerte y perfeccionaros del todo. Soy el que será vuestra guía en el desierto, y el que será vuestra salud hecho hombre, y el que será vuestra entera gloria, hecho juez" [He that shall be, shall be, shall be; repeating this future tense word three times almost as to say: I am He who promised to your fathers that I would come now to free them from Egypt, and then shall be born among you to redeem you from sin and shall come back in the end in the same human form to destroy death and perfect you altogether. I am He who shall be your guide in the desert, your salvation as man and your whole glory as judge] (Luis de León [1957], pp. 2:443–44).

<sup>159</sup> Consider the debate of Christian theology and Marxist philosophy at Herrenschiemsee in 1966, sequel to the Salzburg conference in 1965, organized by the Paulus-Gesellschaft. See especially K. Rahner's contribution (1966/1). See the complete acts published by Kellner (1966). Cf. K. Rahner's contribution (1966/2), pp. 208–13.

<sup>160</sup> See a text in itself full of suggestions, Cullmann (1965), p. 214: "T. Boman, hat in seinem Buch: *Das hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechischen*, 3. Aufl., 1959, S. 27ff. gezeigt, dass haya im Hebräischen eher 'wirken' als 'sein' bedeutet. Jahwe sagt also: Ich handle als der ich handle, nämlich heilsgeschichtlich; ich bin der Heilsgeschichtliche" [T. Boman has shown in his *Das hebräische . . .* that *haya* in Hebrew means "to act" rather than "to be." Jahwe says, in fact: I act as the one who acts, that is, according to the History of salvation. I am the fulfillment of the History of Salvation]. See also Rad (1965), pp. 193ff.

understand action as presupposing substance.<sup>161</sup> Voices from Buddhist circles, however, are raised to remind us that the true meaning of the Hebrew verb *hayah* is not "being," but rather "becoming," "toiling," and also "occurring."<sup>162</sup> Neither do we lack modern interpreters who, under the influence of the apophatic attitude of a certain current philosophy, translate the Exodus expression as, "And what concern is that of yours?"<sup>163</sup> Still others assert that YHWH means "He who causes being," who causes what exists.<sup>164</sup>

But let us return from our digression on the fate of the divine name within Christianity to our examination of the equation God = Being. Leaving aside the reaction of which it has been made the object in our day, we can admit that the achievement of this identification has been a genuine intellectual fear, and not a blunder as some today would have us believe. Indeed, the demands of human reflection are crystal clear in this regard. If God is to live up to the demands of the human mind and heart, He cannot be a sort of Master simply directing and determining from without the destinies of men and things. He will have to support and sustain these beings from within also, giving them inner strength from their deepest core. And once the reflective, speculative mind has discovered the universal and perfect concept of Being, it will accept the consequence: only as Being can God effectively and honorably fulfill the divine functions that the speculative mind cannot help but attribute to God. The God of the intellect, then, will be the source, the origin, the creator, the basis, the foundation of all beings; He will be Being par excellence. All else, including man, will "be" in the measure that they proceed from God, participate in God, grow in God, and so on. Here God is not so much the Other as the One, from whom and in whom all things are.

The advantages of this conception are numerous and allow the transcendence of so many antinomies. An "external" God, however compassionate, can always become either a capricious tyrant or a superhuman force simply unconcerned with human needs. Now this danger is averted and God is transformed into our support since we come from, are in, and return to God. Thus is the will of God "tamed," as it were, without detriment to reverence, and without limiting God in any way, because God is conceived as being the ultimate law of things. God cannot "go against Himself."<sup>165</sup>

With this identification, another intellectual difficulty is overcome: the radical dualism between God and man, between Unity and Multiplicity. The totality of things is but the body, the creation, the manifestation, the work, the expression . . . of the Divine. There is nothing outside God (and, indeed, it is from nothing that God will create).

Furthermore, only such a conception will permit any real collaboration between religion, theology, and philosophy. Only the identification between God and Being seems to allow for the mind not to flee the religious field and for the intellectual to keep religious faith.<sup>166</sup>

<sup>161</sup> Cf. Cullmann (1965), p. x.

<sup>162</sup> See the works in Japanese of Tetsutaro Ariga, director of the Japanese Kyoto review *Japanese Religions*, who speaks of a *hayatological* thinking, as distinguished from an *ontological* form of thought. The former would be typical of Hebrew mentality, the latter of the Greek. See Abe (1963), pp. 14ff.

<sup>163</sup> See Allmen (1964), "God," p. 144. Allmen cites 2 Kings 8:1; Ex 33:1; 12:25 in support of this interpretation, which he accepts as true in part.

<sup>164</sup> Cross (1961); Hyatt (1967).

<sup>165</sup> See the same principle at work in Brahmanic ritualism, which seeks to place God in the position of not harming others because of the possibility of self-harm. See Vesci (1985).

<sup>166</sup> The process is fraught with conflict. Consider the paradigmatic lots of Socrates, Galileo, Michele Serveto, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and others. Ultimately, however, religion accepts, indeed actually appeals to, the testimony of such individuals, who have made an effort to harmonize faith with reason.

The aim of this synthesis, evidently, is to demonstrate that the God of reason is none other than the God of religion. But the God of the thinking mind can be nothing else than Being; thus begins the rationalization of theology, and Aristotle's Prime Mover is transformed into the God of the Christians; Plato's supreme Good will be only a new name for the Divine Providence of the God of religion; Indra, Varuna, Śiva will be only different names and manifestations of the one *Brahman*,<sup>167</sup> and so forth. There cannot be two "Gods," one for faith and one for reason. God is absolute Being.<sup>168</sup>

The road toward divinization of Being is a process of extraordinary importance. It seems to promise a solution for the antinomies that torment the human mind and harmonization of human existential tensions. If God is Being, then Good is also Being and not merely the cold discharge of duty. If God is Being, then Truth acquires its whole religious sanction, and the scandal that so shocked medieval Christian philosophers (that God may lie, or behave immorally, like the Gods of the Greeks, or be capricious, as the God of the Old Testament) will no longer happen. Besides, not only will the Truth set us free, and Good make us happy, but the conflict of classic Greek tragedy will never more recur. Never again can there be an irreconcilable conflict between God and the law of destiny. Being is the highest God. Reality is One, and the World is a *kosmos* (according to the Greek etymology, an ordered, regulated, and beautiful whole: a joy) and Man is part of it. The will of God is the very expression of the intimate law of Being.

If God is Being, religion holds the key to all problems, human and cosmic alike. Man may not know the solution yet, but the solution exists. There is no such thing as a World spinning on its own and a king ruling over it to keep it in line. The relationship between God and the World is intimate, beings are beings because in one way or another they participate in, express, are Being. The Christian dogma of "creation" seeks to express nothing else: the total dependence of beings on Being, in this new union of philosophy and religion.<sup>169</sup> God as absolute Being is the God of Paradise, where there is no room for non-being (evil, ugliness, suffering, etc.).

Thus, theology is gradually turning into philosophy, and God is absorbed by ontology. The true theologian is now the philosopher and the contemplative. Contemplation of the world of Being not only brings the greatest happiness, it is the very aim of human life.

This same process, which took place in the Greek and then in the Christian world, also took place in India, where the true religious person is the man who *knows*, the sage whose path is precisely the path of knowledge (*jñāna-mārga*). If the identification took place differently, then the discovery of *brahman* as Absolute, beyond the kingdoms of being (*sat*) and non-being (*asat*) alike, would undoubtedly derive from the universal call of the spirit for a

<sup>167</sup> See KenU III.1ff. Here the process of harmonizing faith and reason has perhaps not followed the same route of conflict as in the cases mentioned in the preceding note.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. a modern attempt to preserve the Scholastic identification of God with absolute Being through the Heideggerian problematic—rather than its solution—in Lotz (1962), pp. 573–79. Lotz has devoted the best of his thought to an effort to reconcile the traditional Scholastic idea of God and Being with the Heideggerian conception of Being. He is scarcely disposed, however, to renounce an identification of God and absolute Being, a renunciation regarded by Heidegger as essential. See, in addition to the already quoted works (1956), pp. 79–121; (1961), pp. 117–28; (1963), pp. 289–300.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. one of many assertions, stating: "unde operatio Creatoris magis pertingit ad intima rei quam operatio causarum secundarum" [Hence the operation of the Creator extends to the innermost being of things more than does the operation of second causes] (Thomas Aquinas, *In Sententian 11d.1, q.1, a.1*). See what we have already stated on the intimacy of the divine operation.

unification of the discoveries of the mind with the needs of religion.<sup>170</sup> A certain Christian, Hindū, and Muslim spirituality is wholly founded on this premise: knowledge of the truth means religious fulfillment.

We have suggestive examples of this position in the Christian discussions on natural law considered divine because it pertains to "nature," as well as in the Vedantic lucubrations on the salvific role of cognition, which, in the very discovery of Truth, attains Reality. *Gnōsis*, *jñāna*, *al-ḥikmat* saves.

There are also thorns, however, in the ontomorphic bed of roses. If God is Being, this obviously solves many troubling riddles of the human mind, but opens another set of problems, which the religiosity of the first anthropomorphic stage had no need to confront.

First, the personal character of the Divine is now somewhat obscured by its ontological weight. It is not easy to see how one might strike a personal relationship with Being. And, indeed, one of the characteristics of the ontomorphic moment is the purification of cult and the all but total elimination of sacrifice.

Yet another problem looms on the horizon of the ontological God in the moral field. God must now accept, so to speak, a complex of ethical needs that seem necessary to Being, despite the great disadvantages they represent for Divinity. Along with Being, God is found automatically to have the attributes of Power, Perfection, Goodness, Beauty, Omniscience, and so on—all attributes that satisfy the intellectual demand for perfection, but encounter difficulties when it comes to harmonization. The classic example is the problem of evil and suffering. As long as God and Being walked their separate ways, the presence of suffering and evil constituted no problem. God was the absolute, all-powerful Lord, enjoying the unchallenged right of life and death with regard to creatures who can only supplicate God or seek to appease Him or turn away His wrath, softening His will.<sup>171</sup> God was not necessarily good, although He could be merciful.<sup>172</sup> As for the obvious imperfection of the world, often enough some other agent was made responsible for this, and God was none the worse for it. Since God was not identified with Being, He was under no obligation to answer for unlimited omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, or faultless perfection.<sup>173</sup> Where God is not Being, evil is a human and not a divine problem. God can even be responsible for evil, and not be in the least diminished thereby. Indeed, such responsibility can actually be a sign of His power.<sup>174</sup> But in becoming Being, in becoming the Absolute, God also acquires all other

<sup>170</sup> See, e.g., Radhakrishnan (1929).

<sup>171</sup> Cf. the Old Testament God as described in Psalms.

<sup>172</sup> A Sufi legend recounts that Allah once addressed himself to a Sufi who was spending his life in a hermitage in the desert, heaped with honors and veneration by the local populace, who would supply him with food in return for his counsel. "Were I to tell the people what a great sinner thou art, no one would wish to have anything to do with thee any longer." "Yea, Lord," replied the Sufi, and added, "But were I to tell them how merciful thou art, neither would anyone wish to have anything more to do with thee." And so it was agreed that neither would betray their common secret.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. a whole series of cosmogonic myths, for example, those called by Eliade "of cosmogonic immersion," in which God Himself does not know that the one He sends to the depths of the waters to collect a bit of earth with which to build the world is precisely the devil. Thus God is not responsible for evil in the world, not even by virtue of "ignorance" and levity in making use of an insufficiently trustworthy agent. The "myth of original sin" would also mean to deliver God from responsibility for evil and suffering in the world, without thereby accusing God of mental cruelty, or of having placed too much trust in man.

<sup>174</sup> Let us not forget that the destruction of the Temple was the manifestation of YHWH's power, not defeat, and no one questioned His Goodness—not so with the Shoah.

perfections in an absolute manner, and the presence of evil poses a dilemma that has never been resolved: either God is not almighty (if He were, He would have been able to eliminate evil and suffering) or else God is not good (though able to eliminate evil, He did not, and this is no longer a sign of power, rather, of "immorality").<sup>175</sup> The answer that evil is due to human malice fails to do justice to the premise that God is absolute Being: in such case even human evil could not be beyond God's almighty and perfect control.

Neither is the problem resolved by attacking it from a strictly philosophical perspective. St. Augustine's ingenuous response solves it only partially and provisionally. Evil, Augustine explained, is a privation of being, and God cannot be responsible for what "is-not." Yet this compromise fails to come to grips with moral evil: the human being can maintain a negative will even beyond and against the almighty will of an infinitely good God. Besides, such a conceptualization stirs up a whole new set of problems relating to non-being and nothingness. A God-Being who in one fashion or another is limited by non-Being, a God who can be in some way diminished by nothingness, is no longer the absolute Being postulated by philosophy. Of course, it is instructive to observe that the problem of evil arises with a certain conception of Being—namely, that of Aristotle. Where the *brahman* and its ontologization are concerned, the problem of the World is presented in much the same way; however, here it is not the existence of evil that is a stumbling block, but rather the existence of plurality, of bodily existence, and of ignorance (*avidya*).

As we continue to examine the philosophical process, we begin to see that the only logical response that might in some way safeguard the "rights" or "attributes" of God in their entirety will consist in an assertion that evil and suffering only appear as such, since, if God permits them, it is basically because ultimately they *are* good.<sup>176</sup> For this "solution" to be plausible, such thesis must not be interpreted, as a certain form of spirituality does, saying that God permits evil in order that good may come of it. This would be immoral, in the hypothesis of God's omnipotence. One should rather say that evil and suffering are not actually charged with the negativity with which they are clothed. Our vision of reality is based on an error. Evil is not evil; it is not real.

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<sup>175</sup> The impact of the difficulty is felt from the very beginning of Christianity. Cf. for example, "Si Deus bonus et praescius futuri, et avertendi male potens, cur hominem passus est labi? Quod si evenit . . . [in this case original sin] Deus neque bonus credendus, neque praescius neque potens" [if God is good, knows the future, and can forestall evil, why did God allow man to fall? If this happens ( . . . ) God should not be believed to be good, or foreknowing, or powerful] (Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, book 2, chap. 5 [PL 2:288]). "Aut scivit Deus hominem in paradiso positum prevaricaturum esse . . . aut nescivit. Si scivit, non est in culpa is qui praescientiam Dei vitare non potuit, sed ille qui tamen condidit. Si nescivit, cui praescientiam tollis, aufers et divinitatem" [Either God knew that man, placed in Paradise, would fall . . . or else God did not know. If God knew, the guilty one is not the one who could not escape the divine foreknowledge, but the one who nevertheless (placed man in Paradise). If God did not know, then if you deny prescience, you also must leave aside divinity] (Jerome, *Dialogus adversus Pelagianos* II.6 [PL 33:575]).

<sup>176</sup> The Christian answer is highly significant, especially in Greek patristics, but also in Latin patristics and even in Scholasticism. All is justified by the grace of Christ, whose positivity submerges and overcomes any possible guilt and suffering. See the texts in Galtier (1947), pp. 74–94. Consider also the celebrated *felix culpa* of liturgy. However, one difficulty remains: why did the regal magnificence of Christ have to pass through suffering, misery, and sin? In the historical order, a more or less plausible answer can sometimes be given that respects human freedom. But this is not possible in an ontological order that identifies God with Being. Furthermore, even the redemptive act of Christ has not modified the existence of evil.



Here the difficulty is that if evil is not evil, neither is man *man*, since evil is an inextricable ingredient of human clay. The divinization of Being leads to the annihilation of man. If God is Being, man is (still) non-being, is not (yet) made, he is appearance, becoming, he is in gestation, in mere transition, as *maya* Vedānta says.

Nor is this the only difficulty of such identification. Another very important issue lies in the implied coercion of the divine liberty. A God who was "pure Being" could not act after the fashion of the God of the religions. A perfect God must be "good," impartial, and just. He cannot permit favoritisms or acts of wrath. In strict logic, then, God cannot answer the prayers of the faithful, for these often consist of requests for personal favors and protection. This means that the God of Being cannot *love*. Furthermore, the perfection of such a God seems to call for immobility and immutability—seeing that, in this same philosophy of Being, any change presupposes the absence of that which has not yet come into being and, hence, is imperfection. God cannot "stoop" or "draw near" to creatures. Nor, indeed, can Aristotle's Prime Mover, that Supreme Being of such a great part of Christian and Vedantic Scholasticism, have any real relationship with the world.<sup>177</sup> How could this God = Being be able then to love creation?

Scholasticism never solved this problem (for all its crucial meaning for Christian faith). Strictly speaking, perfect Being cannot love beings, does not approach them, is not concerned with their reaching Him, that they may be saved and "divinized." If we rely on the metaphysical premises of Being, such expressions no longer have any meaning. It makes no sense to say that Immovable Perfection "is moved" toward beings, and it is even more senseless to say that beings "reach" Immovable Perfection.<sup>178</sup> A mediator will be needed (Christ, or Īśvara, or the *iṣṭadevata*) in order to have a religion. But this will breach the divine self-sufficiency.

When all is said and done, if God assumes the character of Being there is no longer room for beings. Pantheism or atheism is at the gate. The choice is radical: either Being or beings. After all, Being allows no plural (it would cease to be Being). Beings, on the other hand, have no singular (if there were only one being, it would be Being). The two are incompatible.<sup>179</sup> Theories of analogy and participation may rescue some of the philosophical *aporias* that we have seen, but cannot succeed in saving God and in preserving His Being.<sup>180</sup>

### *Personalism*

Philosophy has moved in other directions, however, without, of course, shelving either the demands of reason or the claims of Being. God is neither the Other, the distinct, the extraneous, nor the One, identical, undivided. God is "neither one nor the other." God is neither altogether transcendent nor totally immanent. Neither dualism nor monism do justice to the divine mystery. The demands of reason would have God as Being, but those of the

<sup>177</sup> Cf. Śaṅkara, BSBh I.1.2, commented on by Panikkar (1994/X).

<sup>178</sup> "Zu diesem Gott kann der Mensch weder beten, noch, kann er ihm opfern. Vor der *Causa sui* kann der Mensch weder aus Scheu ins Knie fallen, noch kann er vor diesem Gott musizieren und tanzen" [To this God can humanity neither pray nor sacrifice. Before the *Causa sui*, humanity can neither fall on its knees in fear and trembling, nor before this God make music and dance] (Heidegger [1957], p. 64).

<sup>179</sup> In Sanskrit and Latin this incompatibility is clearer: it takes on grammatical evidence. *sat* and *esse* have no plural: to construct a plural, one must use another form: *entia* (from *ens*), and in Sanskrit (*bhūṭani*) from the root *bhuvan* (from *bhu*, becoming).

<sup>180</sup> Marx had understood this well: if God is Being, then there is no room for man. If we state the dilemma in these terms, we could solve it only by sacrificing the weaker aspect, which, obviously, is not man but God. See Crespi (1965), p. 76.

heart, of love, demand to have God as Person<sup>181</sup>—hence the concept of personal being and the effort to characterize Being not by its ontological weight, so to speak, but by its personalistic content. The divine Being would be a Person, then, a personal Being: an intelligence, yes, but also a will, a knowledge, a love. Being become a Supreme Entity.

This seems to be the synthesis discovered many centuries ago and still alive in traditional religious circles: neither the pure anthropomorphism that leaves aside the God of the philosophers and the demands of reason, nor the simple ontomorphism that seems to ignore the rights of the heart and the need for loving dialogue, but personalism—that is, the personal characterization of Being itself. Here the process of personalization develops not only from natural or cosmic forces, as before, but mostly in the concept of Being itself. The Gods are no longer anthropomorphized but rather Being is personalized. The *sat* is the *puruṣa*.<sup>182</sup> Being is human, which in this case means that complete, absolute Being is none other than an absolute Person. Religion is therefore neither pure voluntaristic submission (symbolized by sacrifice), nor mere intellectual contemplation (in which worship is expressed in meditation), but personal dialogue, loving interchange, reciprocal cognition (taking the ritual form of worship, prayer, hymnology). This is *bhakti*, this is loving dedication to the divine mystery as personal entity par excellence.

But neither is this conception of Being without its difficulties. In the first place, as we have just seen, if we consider Being with all its implications, this Being has no plural and is one. A person, however, cannot be alone. It is difficult to admit, especially for substantialistic thinking, that there could be cognition and love without there being an object of this cognition and love. However, a person is fundamentally relationship. We should then admit that Being is simply relationship, without any subject as its substrate. But can this still be called Being?

A person cannot stay alone. Ultimately, Person is neither singular nor plural. The Trinitarian explanation is an attempt to give an answer to this difficulty, but only when it is interpreted apart from substantialistic approaches.<sup>183</sup> Relational dualism seems to be the inevitable result of the conception of God as Person. This is not a serious problem for anthropomorphism. But it becomes a problem for personalism, the moment that personalism seeks to retain the exigencies of Being. How can we reconcile metaphysically Person and Being?

Moreover, if God is person, other difficulties arise when we seek to maintain His identification with Being. Indeed, we are told that there is something called a “theological difference” (which does not coincide with the “ontological difference”), in both the transcendental and the transcendentalistic sense.<sup>184</sup> The “theological difference,” we are given to understand, is

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<sup>181</sup> See the issues raised by those like Hamann or Jacobi, who declare themselves atheists with their reason, but believers with their feeling. Consider from another viewpoint the modern intuition: “Cas de contradictoires vrais. Dieu existe, Dieu n'existe pas. Où est le problème? Je suis tout à fait sûr qu'il y a un Dieu, en ce sens que je suis tout à fait sûr que mon amour n'est pas illusoire. Je suis tout à fait sûr qu'il n'y a pas de Dieu, en ce sens que je suis tout à fait sûr que rien de réel ne ressemble à ce que je peux concevoir quand je prononce ce nom. Mais cela que je ne puis concevoir n'est pas une illusion” [A case of genuine contradiction. God exists. God does not exist. Where is the problem? I am altogether sure that there is God, in the sense that I am altogether sure that my love is not illusory. I am altogether sure that there is no God, in the sense that I am altogether sure that nothing real resembles what I can conceive when I pronounce this name. But what I cannot conceive is not an illusion] (Weil [1948], p. 132).

<sup>182</sup> See SU 12ff.

<sup>183</sup> See Panikkar (1989/XXIII; 1993/XXXIII).

<sup>184</sup> The expression is from Heidegger. See a good summary, introducing a new distinction based on a personal communication from the author: “a) die transzendente oder ontologische Differenz

the difference between God as Supreme Being and Being itself—that is, it is the difference between the God of religion and the Being of philosophy.<sup>185</sup> Thus God is no longer Being tout court, but simply the Supreme Being: God is no longer *Esse*, but primary *Ens* or *Ens a se*.<sup>186</sup>

God as a person seems then to abdicate the universality of Being.<sup>187</sup> The answer could be very simple, we are told: if the addition of a personal character leads to a new separation, why not accept it, since, after all, God and Being were already distinct in the human

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im engeren Sinne: den Unterschied des Seienden von seiner Seiendheit, b) die transzendenthafte oder ontologische Differenz im weiteren Sinne: den Unterschied des Seienden und seiner Seiendheit vom Sein selbst, c) die transzendente oder theologische Differenz im strengen Sinne: den Unterschied des Gottes vom Seienden, von der Seiendheit und vom Sein" [(a) the *transcendental* or ontological difference, in the more narrow sense: the difference between an entity and the "beingness" of this entity; (b) The difference according to transcendence, or ontological difference in the broader sense: the difference between entity with its "beingness" and Being itself; (c) The *transcendent difference*, or theological difference in the strict sense: the difference between God and entity, between beingness and Being] (Max Muller [1958], p. 73).

<sup>185</sup> For a defense of the Heideggerian position that nevertheless preserves the Christian doctrine of God, see, in addition to the cited work by Max Muller (1958), H. Ott (1959), pp. 129–57.

<sup>186</sup> See a characteristic passage: "Aristoteles nennt die von ihm gekennzeichnete Wissenschaft, die das Seiende als das Seiende besieht, die erste Philosophie. Aber diese betrachtet nicht nur das Seiende in seiner Seiendheit, sondern betrachtet zugleich dasjenige Seiende, das der Seiendheit rein entspricht, das höchste Seiende. Dieses Seiende, το θεϊον, das Göttliche, wird in einer seltsamen Zweideutigkeit auch "das Sein" genannt. Die erste Philosophie ist als Ontologie zugleich die Theologie des wahrhaft Seienden. Genauer wäre sie die Theologie zu nennen. Die Wissenschaft des Seienden als solchen ist in sich onto-theologisch" [Aristotle calls the science he is defining, the science that considers entities as such, "first philosophy." However this (philosophy) considers not only entities in what they are but also in what corresponds purely to "entity"—i.e., to the supreme Entity. Such Entity, το θεϊον, the Divine, is also called Being by a strange double meaning. First philosophy, as ontology, is also a theology of the True Entity. It would be more accurate to call it theology. The science of Entities as such is in itself onto-theological] (Heidegger [1963], p. 179).

<sup>187</sup> Tillich follows the Heideggerian conception of Being as much as possible, veering away when Heidegger separates God from Being, from the Absolute. Consider, by way of indication and example: "The Being of God is Being itself. The Being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a Being alongside others. If God is a being, then He is subject to the categories of finitude" (Tillich [1951–1963; 1972, p. 1:303]). Further on he says, "Since God is the ground of being he is in Himself the ground of the structure of being. . . . God is such structure" (p. 307). Tillich knew the objections of the personalists, and sought to respond to them with a book on the subject (1955/1), as well as with the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* (1951–1963): "No theology can suppress the notion of being as the capability of being. The two things cannot be separated. When one says that God is or that (God) has being, the question arises as to how God's relation to being is understood. The only possible answer seems to be that God is being itself, in the sense of the power of being or the power to conquer non-being" (ibid., p. 2:11 of the English original). As H. Ott rightly observes (1959, pp. 151–52), "Dieses Projekt kann Tillich aber nur entwerfen und durchführen, weil er mit den 'Kategorien des Seins' als mit statischen, immerwährenden, unausweichlichen rechnet. Insofern ist der Seinsbegriff hier metaphysisch-ungeschichtlich gedacht. Tillichs Unternehmen einer Gotteslehre von Gott als dem 'sein-selbst' wäre vom Gedanken des Seins als Geschick her, welcher die 'Kategorien' als jeweilige 'epochale' geschichtliche Prägungen erkennt, weder durchführbar noch überhaupt projektierbar" [Tillich was able to conceive and realize this project only because he treats the "categories of being" as if they were static, constant, and unmovable. In this sense the concept of being is considered here in a metaphysical (and) an-historical (form). Tillich's construction of a doctrine of God as Being-Itself could not be realized or planned from the notion of Being as destiny, a concept that recognizes the categories formed by destiny in every 'era.'"]

conception, *quoad nos*? That is to say: let us maintain God as Person, but let us deliver God from Being.

Even so, difficulties arise. If God is Person (i.e., relationship) it will be difficult to explain the intimate connection between this God and nonpersonal beings unless we consider all entities as personal, eliminating from the notion of person the attributes of intelligence and will. Besides, to avoid returning to our twin cusps—which, as we have seen, cannot coexist—we will have to eliminate the metaphysical category of substance, with all the disadvantages attaching to such elimination (unless one completely changes the ontological schema). Finally, a God who is purely Person will be unable to preserve the traditional transcendence over the human persons with whom He enters into a personal relationship. After all, one cannot play a double game by speaking, on one hand, of “subsistent relations” posited to avoid the obvious difficulties we have mentioned, and, on the other, of “relations of reason” between creator and creatures; personal relationships, however, would then be out of the question.

Today there is an attempt to overcome the dilemma by forcing the process of the personification of Being to its ultimate limits. In the guise of a critique of Western philosophy’s traditional definitions (Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, Richard of St. Victor, Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, and so on) as resting on a reified conception of being and ultimately positing personal being as a species of the genus “being,” modern theology seeks to go beyond the *dingliches Seinsverständnis* (the reified understanding of being) via a genuinely personalistic conception of being itself.<sup>188</sup> Hence many of the *aporias* tormenting the contemporary mind vanish, or at least are explained more convincingly and more thoroughly.<sup>189</sup> At the same time, the door is opened to a religious personalism that would seek to protect the believer from the erosion to which atheism submits both the concept of God and the proof of the existence of God. If God is no longer “cause,” there is no longer any need to seek to “prove” God. Only a “cause” can be searched for, only a “cause” has need of “proof.” God as a person eludes any attempt at demonstration. God cannot be demonstrated, because a person cannot be “demonstrated,” but only *encountered*. If God is person par excellence, he will only be found through an experience of encounter, whereas He will vanish from the horizon of those who have never had this direct relationship.

Yet even this solution does not appear to be altogether satisfactory. Unless we are to fall into a total solipsism and desperate individual subjectivism, the external world, that which is impermeable to consciousness and love, the existence of matter, will continue to be a problem. In order to save man and his need for love, and perhaps in an effort to “save” even God, personalists have had to sacrifice His creation.

The problem, therefore, is deeper and more fundamental. It is clear that we must purify the concept of being, and surely we must not substantialize God or man. But today what is in question is the very personalistic issue, no matter how refined.<sup>190</sup> Could the reason be that the difficulties we encounter in applying a certain concept of being to man, to person, and to things are also encountered (perhaps even to a greater extent) in applying the concept of person to Man and God?<sup>191</sup> We must, however, at least mention other perspectives that

<sup>188</sup> See Ebert (1966) for a good presentation of the issue.

<sup>189</sup> Protestant theology has always had less of a propensity to identify the God of metaphysics with the God of faith. See, e.g., Pannenberg (1971), p. 2. Cf. an original view of the mysticism of Luther in Hoffman (1976).

<sup>190</sup> For a presentation of the traditional Catholic effort, see Moré-Pontgibaud (1957).

<sup>191</sup> See Panikkar (1979/1), where I present an advaita-Trinitarian vision that may offer a way out. The *puruṣa* “is” the I (the Father) at the origin of the human Thou (the Son) at the heart of the World (Matter) in virtue of the power (*śakti*, δύναμις) of the Spirit.

deserve attention: on one hand, the personalistic approach that follows the models of Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier but transcends them,<sup>192</sup> and on the other, the dialogical philosophy of Ferdinand Ebner,<sup>193</sup> Martin Buber,<sup>194</sup> and others.<sup>195</sup> In this respect it would be appropriate to go deeper into the original concept of Trinity.<sup>196</sup> We must, however, let the curtain fall on this first act of the drama in order to keep a balance in our representation. We shall return to this when we deal with a "depersonalized" notion of person.

To sum up: the identification of God and Being is far from stable. Personalism seems to offer a middle path, but it is still far from offering a solution. The Person known as God is still problematic. God stands at the crossroads of a new anthropology, ontology, and cosmology.

The path we have been following has indeed been a spiral. We have not gone back to our starting point, yet we are continually returning to it from a different height. We have seen that anthropomorphism discovers God as a *Thou* with Whom we can speak. Ontomorphism presents Him as a *He* of Whom we can speak. Personalism reveals Him as an *I*—Who speaks to us.

If all this were true, it would mean that the personal God of religion is again distinguished from the Being of philosophy, although He has not tread the path of identification for centuries in vain. That is why He cannot go back and fall back into a clearly insufficient anthropomorphism. But what will become of God if we avoid anthropomorphism and still separate God from Being? This is our new problem.

### *The Divergence between God and Being: The Deontologization of God*

In the West, ever since Aristotle, "being" in the fullest sense has been substance, that which subsists, that which is self-sustaining, that which may be invisible and hidden because it is the foundation of everything else, yet no less real on that account. On the contrary, as the foundation of all, it is "more real" than all it sustains. Being is the subject, the *ousia*. In the East also, especially since the Upaniṣads, the subject is real, it is the foundation, the *ātman*, in contrast with the world of impermanence.

In virtue of this implicit substantiality of Being, if God is "real" he can only be identified with Being. God will be the ultimate subject by antonomasia, Substance, the Foundation of all things, the Primal Cause, the Unmoved Mover, the ultimate Creator, infinite Good, perfect Idea, fullness of Reason—in a word, supreme Being.

Today, however, this identification is flawed by reason of the difficulties we have considered, either on the part of Being or on the part of God.

*On the part of God*, the difficulties are those that we have considered above.

*On the part of Being*, substantialistic thought is no longer dominant and paradigmatic, and therefore, substance has lost its privileged ontic position. Countless systems of thought today no longer regard substance as an indispensable concept in their speculations, either for purposes of defending it or denying it.<sup>197</sup>

<sup>192</sup> See, among the Italians, Danese (1984; 1986); see also, from a philosophical point of view, the two volumes with rich bibliography by Limone (1988; 1990), but especially Pavan and Milano (1984 and 1987) for the Trinitarian issues we are considering.

<sup>193</sup> See Ebner's three volumes.

<sup>194</sup> See Buber (1962).

<sup>195</sup> See Steinbüchel (1966); Schrey (1983), etc.

<sup>196</sup> Cf. Mühlen (1966; 1968); Schadel (1984–1988).

<sup>197</sup> The philosophy of Whitehead, with the whole current of process philosophy, would be a suitable example. See Gunton (1993), who, after a criticism of modernity and of the substantialism

Even problems that would seem by their very nature to be grounded on substance—as, for example, the so-called ontological difference, or even the classic distinction between essence and existence—are addressed from other premises than the primacy of substance.<sup>198</sup>

Let us now attempt to formulate our problem in two distinct ways, first *negatively*, then *positively*.

The *negative* formulation might be: How can God escape ontology? How can God be rescued from the net of ontology in such a way as to safeguard the rights of both? A peaceful symbiosis between Being and God is ultimately impossible. And yet, all through the history of Western thought, even when the two seem to be demanding separation in order to follow each its own path, they have always ended up reaching a mutual accord to save a situation that appeared compromised by their independence. In fact, more than once when ontology found itself in a blind alley, it appealed to God. The case of Descartes, who appeals to divine veridicity to uphold his system, is not unique. And, on the other hand, when God was hard-pressed by ethical concerns or by history, more than once theology called upon ontology, via a concept of Being whose purpose was to rescue apologetics when it floundered.<sup>199</sup> The whole problem of "divine justice," and in a Christian context the current theory of redemption, are examples of the protection that the concept of Being provided for the God of religion. How could God have willed, or at least allowed, the "passion" of the Son, if He could have accomplished it all without suffering and without sin on the part of humankind. This question can only be answered satisfactorily if we identify divine justice with the intrinsic and immutable law of Being, which, in virtue of a metaphysical theory of evil, and applying the principle of noncontradiction, has no other remedy than allowing evil to be stopped ontologically. God cannot do as He wishes: He is bound to the law of Being. His "justice," for example, demands something that, if he were a person, he would loathe with respect to his "love" or his "will."

Can Being and God be disentangled in such a way as to leave a place for God beside, above, or under the Being of ontology? The problem here is not so much one of Being as one

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of Scholasticism, outlines "trinitarian transcendentals" as a way out for a Christian theology capable of giving answers to the contemporary world.

<sup>198</sup> "Dieses Denken, das des Seins selbst uneingedenkt geblieben, ist das einfache und alles tragende, darum rätselvolle und unerfahrene Ereignis der abendländische Geschichte. . . . Wie ist es mit dem Sein? Mit dem Sein ist es nichts. Wie, wenn darin erst das bisher verhüllte Wesen des Nihilismus sich ankündigte?" [This thinking, which has left Being itself (in oblivion), is the simple, all-vehiculating event and, therefore, the enigmatic and not experienced event, of Western history. . . . What happens to Being? Nothing at all. Might not this announce the hitherto veiled essence of nihilism?] (Heidegger [1963], p. 239).

<sup>199</sup> It cannot be denied that the alliance between the supreme Being and beings has obfuscated the very concept of Being, and that the celebrated Heideggerian *Seinsvergessenheit* touches a critical point for both Western speculation and for dialogue with other cultures. "Sein" ist die Heidegger . . . nicht mehr der oberste Begriff, den das Denken hat oder hervorbringt, sondern es ist die Bedingung der Möglichkeit dafür, dass überhaupt Denken ist. Als solche ist das Sein ein Geschehen der Entbergung, ein Geschick, das dem Denken überwaltigend widerfährt ["Being" in Heidegger is no longer the highest concept (of greater extension) of thought or produced by thought (Heidegger's reproach of Western tradition), but the very condition of the possibility of thought. Being as such is an event of revelation, a destiny that imposes itself on thought] (H. Ott [1959], p. 144). "Die Geschichte des Seins beginnt und zwar notwendig mit der Vergessenheit des Seins" [The history of being begins, and necessarily, with the oblivion of Being] (Heidegger [1963], p. 243). See also, "Gezetzt, dass am Sein alles 'ist' liegt, dann besteht das Wesen des Nihilismus darin, dass es mit dem Sein selbst nichts ist" [Presupposing that all that 'is' has to do with Being, then the essence of nihilism consists in this, that Being itself has to do with nothing] (ibid., p. 245).

of God, who ought to be freed from the safekeeping and protection provided by metaphysics. How can God escape the category of Being?

A *positive* formulation of our problem will simply ask the nature of God's relationship with Being, since one can hardly ask to what class of being God belongs, or what His rightful place is in the universality of Being. How are we to arrive at God without colliding with Being? The believer seeks to enter into a relationship with the Divine, to recognize God, without having to accept all manner of philosophical connections. In other words, how can the believer reach God while avoiding the policing of Being, escaping the matrix of Being, which philosophers, theologians, and the whole of Western culture have networked around God? In short, is it possible for the religious attitude to elude the nets set by thinking? Obviously, feeling, poetry, action, and certainly mysticism claim an access to God. All these, however, without the support of thinking, even if only as an invisible support, cannot withstand rational criticism and may not hold their ground. In order to have a "postulate of practical reason," a need moved by feeling, a poetic or mystical experience, a form of consciousness is necessary that will not avoid the interference of thinking reason. In short, we could ask: what is the *ontological status* of God?

We may discuss, from Parmenides onward, the exact nature of the relationship between being and thinking. One thing, however, is certain: the relationship is very tight.<sup>200</sup> Now, will it be possible to adopt a postcritical attitude (not merely nonreflexive, as an instinctive, vital, preconscious attitude would be) and make room for a genuine relationship with God, yet without entering the ground of thought, or even without entering into competition with Being? We know that there can be thinking that makes no reference to God,<sup>201</sup> but can there be a God who makes no reference to our thinking, without thereby returning to anthropomorphism? Or, can there be a God manifesting Himself beyond our thinking faculty without dismissing the importance of human thought?<sup>202</sup> After all, if we were to impose artificial limitations to thinking from without, there would be nothing to prevent thought from contravening the prohibition and continuing to impose Being on any awareness of ultimate reality.

It is difficult to give a satisfactory answer to the questions that arise. The history of the God of Being has largely been written. The history of the "non-being" of God, the source of these questions, has yet to be mapped by part of the modern Western world. The age of Enlightenment had its purpose; the journey yet to be undertaken, however, seems to belong to the *kairos* of the present world. Any new journey along unknown paths is an arduous task. The message of Buddha, it seems to us, is not alien to this task, a task as challenging as any new path toward the Unknown.

What appears to be beyond discussion is the fact that these questions do not allow us to waste time in futile diatribes and challenge radically the Western and possibly other cultures. We have intentionally spoken of a mutation, and the situation of humanity and of the earth confirms the gravity of the problem. What we have called *ecosophy* constitutes a new revelation for men who had walled themselves into an artificial techno-scientific world.

<sup>200</sup> "Das Sein ist kein Erzeugnis des Denkens. Wohl dagegen ist das wesentliche Denken ein Ereignis des Seins" [Being is not a product of thought. Rather, essential thought is an event of Being] (Heidegger [1949], p. 43).

<sup>201</sup> "Demgemäß ist das gott-lose Denken, das den Gott der Philosophie, den Gott als *Causa sui* preisgeben muss, dem göttlichen Gott vielleicht näher" [Accordingly, thought without God, thought that must give up the God of philosophy for the God as *causa sui*, is perhaps closer to the divine God] (Heidegger [1957], p. 65).

<sup>202</sup> See Mt 11:25; Lk 10:21; and the many Pauline diatribes: 1 Cor 1:18–21; 2:14; 3:19; Col 2:8, etc.

Our considerations are not confined in the *topos ouranios* of an ideological Olympus but have to be met in incarnated form in the Earth of men.

Indeed, so far, contemporary criticism has generally attempted to deontologize God. The reaction is understandable, but not always felicitous, as with the hasty denial of the Divine without first proceeding to the reformation of the concept of God. Once again, the drama, or perhaps I should say the tragedy, could be represented in three acts. Let me attempt to sum up the positive process now in gestation.

### *Negation of Being (Atheism)*

The first act of the drama allows no compromise. God is deontologized simply because God is neither Being nor Supreme Entity. God is not, it is nothing. A way to approach the issue could be a modest axiological introduction.

### *The Philosophy of Values*

A first approach, later practically forsaken for impellent reasons, was the popular (for a time) philosophy of values. A "sociology of knowledge" would interpret it as a weak answer to the general atheistic atmosphere, attempting to pull out the painful thorn of the negation of God, emphasizing at the same time the positive aspect of the atheistic position. This would be the lay secular ethical stance.

According to this metaphysical axiology, God would therefore have no being but value; he would not "be" but he would "count." Naturally, the immediate difficulty derives from the proclaimed independence of values from the sphere of Being.<sup>203</sup> On the other hand, let us not forget that metaphysical axiology was born in the West as a last attempt to save an ontology that had momentarily lost the notion of Being.<sup>204</sup> The attempt failed, however, mainly because all intellectual somersaults to reduce God to value—to the supreme value and to the source of any value—were either a mere terminological transposition to express the same idea that was meant by the concept of Being, or were not able to give an account of the function that the very concept of God was meant to fulfill.<sup>205</sup> In the axiological model God should be equal to His value: the model aspires to attribute value to things without giving them a foundation, a principle, an end, and their ultimate cause.<sup>206</sup> This is like saying that the supreme Value is not endowed with

<sup>203</sup> Cf. the inaugural lesson by Habermas at Frankfurt University in 1965: "Werte von Tatsachen abspalten heisst, dem puren Sein abstraktes Soll gegenüberzustellen. Sie sind das nominalistische Spaltprodukt einer Jahrhunderte währenden Kritik an jenem emphatischen Begriff des Seienden, auf das einst Theorie ausschliesslich gerichtet war" [To separate values from facts means to oppose an abstract Having to Be to pure Being. Values are the nominalistic product of a multisecular criticism to that emphatic concept of Being that oriented theory exclusively] (see Habermas [1968], pp. 303–4).

<sup>204</sup> "Der letzte Schlag gegen Gott und gegen die übersinnliche Welt besteht darin, dass Gott, das Seiende des Seienden, zum höchsten Wert herabgewürdigt wird" [The final blow against God and against the suprasensible consists in reducing God, the Entity of entities, to a supreme value] (Heidegger [1963], pp. 239–40).

<sup>205</sup> "Nietzsches Wort 'Gott ist tot'" (ibid., pp. 193–247) includes a frontal attack on thinking in terms of value and makes such thinking responsible for nihilism. Heidegger calls it "das radikale Töten" [the radical killing] (p. 242).

<sup>206</sup> "Die Stelle, die metaphysisch gedacht, Gott eignet, ist der Ort verursachenden Bewirkung und Erhaltung des Seienden als eines Geschaffenen. Dieser Ort Gottes kann leer bleiben" [The place that, metaphysically speaking, belongs to God is the place of causal creation and of the upholding of entity



the characteristic of the traditional God. The place of God thus remains empty. The philosophy of values cannot be a valid substitute for ontology, although the merit of its approach is obvious, especially in enhancing regional ontologies.<sup>207</sup>

A more explicit atheism, however, will not settle for any substitution. It will not assert that although God does not exist He is "value," but simply that He *is not*. . .

### The Death of God

First comes the phase that, since Hegel<sup>208</sup> and Nietzsche,<sup>209</sup> has been popularized in the expression "God is dead." Consider the following passage, which I transcribe *in extenso* on account of its incomparable strength and beauty:

#### The Madman

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!"? As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. "Why, did he get lost?" said one. "Did he lose his way like a child?" said another. "Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Or emigrated?" Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his glances.

"Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how have we done this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on us all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves? What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us—for the sake of this deed he will be part of a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they also were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. "I come too early," he said then; "my time has not come

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inasmuch as it has been created. Such place of God can remain empty] (*ibid.*, p. 235).

<sup>207</sup> Beside Max Scheler and, to an extent, Nicolai Hartmann, the names of René Le Senne, Aloys Müller, and Fritz Joachim von Rintelen deserve to be quoted in this respect.

<sup>208</sup> In 1802, in his *Glauben und Wissen*.

<sup>209</sup> In 1882, in aphorism 125 of his work *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Nietzsche (1988), pp. 3:480–82.

yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds require time even after they are done, before they can be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves."

God is dead because he had been identified with Being, and now this Being of ontology disappears and becomes problematic. The first meaning of the death of God is the rejection of any *meta*-physics—the denial of any reality beyond what is certified by our senses.<sup>210</sup> Here the true atheism would be *materialism*, or the most radical empiricism, "sensism." God does not exist, because nothing exists beyond what is available to our senses. There is no God, because there is no transcendence of any sort.

Furthermore, there is no transcendence, because there is nothing to transcend: and here we have *nihilism* telling us that there is neither being nor nothing. There is a radical difference between "*seeking* nothing"—that is, considering reality to be nothing, non-being, but preserving at the same time the subject, will, desire (so violent that it fails to find an object adequate to its own search, and therefore characterizes it as "nothing"); and nonseeking, *not* "seeking anything" not because the object does not exist or is nothing, but because the subject does not even claim to be, because there is no launching pad to catapult us to Being. The latter would be the Buddhist position, as distinguished from an active, violent nihilism. Unlike Western nihilism, which rejects the object because it fails to find it, Buddhist nihilism rejects the subject as falling short of its destiny.<sup>211</sup>

Perhaps Nietzsche's poetic and grandiose expression, that human beings have "slain God," is not the best way to put it. Perhaps it would be more precise simply to say that God "has died," as if from an inner exhaustion, or because the ground on which He had been standing gave way. That ground was Being, and Being has volatilized.<sup>212</sup> The process has been repeatedly studied, and we do not need to dwell on it.<sup>213</sup>

Neither is this the place for an overview of the question of atheism in the modern world.

<sup>210</sup> See Heidegger's masterly study (1963): pp. 193–247: "Das Wort 'Gott ist tot' bedeutet die übersinnliche Welt ist ohne wirkende Kraft. Sie spendet kein Leben" [The phrase "God is dead" means that the suprasensible world is without effective power. It bestows no life] (*ibid.*, p. 200; see also p. 234).

<sup>211</sup> Cf. how Heidegger (1963) characterizes this position: "Das 'Nichts wollen' bedeutet keineswegs, die bloße Abwesenheit von allem Wirklichen wollen, sondern meint, gerade das Wirkliche wollen, aber diese je und überall als ein Nichtiges und durch dieses erst die Vernichtung wollen" [To "will nothing" does not at all mean to will the simple absence of all reality; it means rather to will reality, but to will it, in each instance and everywhere, as a nothing, and through this to will annihilation]. Cf. as quoted by the same Heidegger: "eher will er [der Wille] noch das Nichts wollen als nicht wollen" [this (the will), rather than *not* willing, wills *nothingness*] (*ibid.*; see Nietzsche [1966], p. 2:839). We should bear in mind that Nietzsche claimed he could have been the Buddha of Europe, although obviously poles apart from the Buddha of India (Nietzsche [1988], p. 10:109). Cf. Mistry (1981). Important also is Figl (1984), particularly pp. 223ff.

<sup>212</sup> "Ce n'est jamais Dieu qui meurt, mais bien la représentation que s'en fait une certaine religion lorsqu'elle permet à la connaissance qu'elle a d'elle-même de se substituer au sacré qui fait sa substance réelle" [It is never God who dies, but the representation made of God by a given religion when it permits the consciousness it has of itself to replace the sacred, which makes up its real substance] (Gilson [1962], p. 408).

<sup>213</sup> See, e.g., Strolz (1965) where, as the subtitle ("Paths to the Experience of the Incarnation") suggests, the question is polarized in anthropological terms, and anthropology is concentrated on the figure of Christ, the Man-God.

The spectrum of positions held by atheists and their critics is a very broad one. Some scholars see a positive value in atheism without espousing it, exhorting believers to adopt a more open attitude.<sup>214</sup> Others study it in the context of its philosophical evolution.<sup>215</sup> There are even those who see it as latent in all postmedieval modern philosophy.<sup>216</sup> This latter theory, however, seems to me to be altogether out of place—even if we broadened its scope from the origins to the frontiers of Western thought, not excluding the various “philosophical” formulations of belief. If the unilateral accentuation of divine immanence can lead to pantheism and the denial of “earthly realities,” as criticism often points out for the religions of Indian origins, the unilateral stress on divine transcendence may lead to the acceptance of atheism and the irrelevance of the divine dimension in all matters relating to human existence, as often happened in so-called Western-Christian civilization. It is not a coincidence that atheism is a modern Western phenomenon.<sup>217</sup> Not only is there a theism implicit in modern atheism, but there also is an atheism implicit in every theism.<sup>218</sup> The moment God is transformed into an object of philosophical reflection, no amount of warnings will be enough to prevent His reification, or at least His objectification with the subsequent loss of its character as the living God of religions. The God of this kind of philosophy will be at most the God of reason, who may be identified as the God of religion, but only in virtue of an extra-philosophical postulate. We will not, however, pursue this line of thought.

What I propose to do instead is to describe the atheistic dimension of existence—in other words, to lay out the dimension of unbelief inherent in faith.<sup>219</sup> I see atheism as one of the phenomena that seek to clarify the ultimate problem of the human being, since it is precisely this problem that is confronted when one speaks of the “Being” of God, or of the structure of Reality, or of man.

From a historical and religious standpoint we could address the issue more or less as follows:

The “Gods,” in the general sense of the word, are the first realities to be perceived by human consciousness—not in the terms that were incorrectly used to define polytheism, but in the realistic sense of religions: as personal beings manifested each time in a specific symbol that exercises a certain function in man’s life. This does not exclude the possibility

<sup>214</sup> “Dans quelle mesure le catholique, en refusant tout ce qu’apporte l’athéisme moderne, ne se met-il pas en dehors de la réalité et ne sauve-t-il pas, seulement, une idée de Dieu sans contenu et sans vérité? Dans quelle mesure, au contraire, en participant aux valeurs de l’athéisme, ne risque-t-il pas de compromettre la pureté de sa foi et toutes ses exigences? Aucune solution intellectuelle et hors de l’expérimentation ne peut être apportée à l’avance à une si dramatique question” [If we reject everything modern atheism has to offer, to what extent do Catholics not part ways with reality, and save only an idea of God devoid of content and truth? On the other hand, if we embrace the values of atheism, to what extent do we perhaps compromise the purity of our own faith, with all its exigencies? No theoretical solution, no solution divorced from experience, can be offered in advance for such a dramatic issue] (Lacroix [1954]).

<sup>215</sup> See, by way of example, Del Noce (1964).

<sup>216</sup> See, for example, the prolific work of Fabro (1964), in which Descartes is *virtually an atheist* (p. 26), Kant *intrinsically and consciously an atheist* (p. 487), Hegel’s *system a theism on the surface and an atheism in depth* (p. 154), and naturally, in one way or another, atheists also include Locke, Malebranche, Leibniz, Schelling, and others. The arguments put forward are perhaps excessive, in view of the fact that they could equally well be lodged against St. Thomas and all of Scholasticism. In what form of monothesis could there not be a latent atheism? See also by the same author (1969).

<sup>217</sup> See Crespi (1965).

<sup>218</sup> See Metz (1965), where the unbelief implicit in the believer’s very act of faith is explicitly analyzed.

<sup>219</sup> See K. Rahner (1967), p. 2; cf. Dalmau (1977).

that, once the question of the unicity or plurality of divine beings is posed, these Gods may be recognized as different names for one single reality. However, a name is something more than a *status vocis*. With the awakening of human self-consciousness, this process is lost. In other words, ecstatic innocence, which in any case recognizes only the concrete specific theophany that is, as it were, fulfilled in the very act of worship (which is what makes it a theophany), becomes reflexive, approaches thought, and thereupon recognizes that all theophanies are but epiphanies of the one *theos*.

In other words, faith in the Gods is gradually eroded by two factors. On one hand, the growth of reflection leads to the discovery of God behind every "God," and on the other hand, reflection sets in motion the curiosity, or perhaps the need, to seek an explanation, on the level of thought, for things and the world, reaching as much as possible for clear and rationally plausible hypotheses. The level of abstraction the mind requires and the need for practical answers are not very compatible with God's creative and transcendent aspect.

We notice that this very process of the unification of the Gods already represents a loss of innocence, a certain disillusionment, since the worship of "God" does not totally fulfill the devotion of the believer, but leaves the mind free to "think" the *Deus semper major* not reached through worship.<sup>220</sup> Those who genuinely *affirm* that God is unreachable no longer *believe* in God, but only think God, and reasonably discover that their thought cannot embrace, cannot hold, cannot *com-prehend* God. They think they have purified their own faith through a concept that, as such, is "higher" than the polytheistic "concept" that addresses many Gods. In fact, those who think that "besides" the God they worship there is an "other" God with whom their God is identified but not confused are those who have sundered the intrinsic unity of the Gods creating two distinct "levels" in the Godhead: the one attained in worship and the one that eludes understanding. On the other hand, those who concentrate on the God they worship without thinking of any other "purer" level, in spite of appearances live the Godhead in a much more authentic and holistic way. In other words, those who appear to be "polytheists" have adopted in each act of worship an attitude that is precisely "monotheistic," rather than vice versa.

On one hand, as we said, faith in the Gods collapses in the very process of reflexive thought. On the other hand, we also said that once thought is under way it is difficult to stop the process. Reflection converts the Gods into diverse *manifestations* of a single God, due to the inclination of the human mind to reduce everything to unity.<sup>221</sup> Again, moreover, reflection—impelled by its other tendency, the drive to search for an explanation—will also discover in this One God the plausible cause of the origin, the essence, and the character of all phenomena that surround man and make up his universe. Yet now, within this new purer and more profound spirituality, religion begins to falter. When Gods are no longer only personal beings that intervene in the life and destiny of men and are converted into "explanations" of the unknown, the first religious crisis takes place: God is transformed into a philosophical pretext.

For example, if we consider the existence of a toothache demon who can be routed by St. Anthony the Abbot, but we also take into account that this demon reacts to aspirin, we are on our way to denying both the existence of the demon and the power of the saint.

In order to preserve God from the unbalanced struggle with science, we have sublimated God into Supreme Being. Now we have "monotheism": God is the One God, the Supreme Being. From "polytheism" we have moved to "monotheism." But then something terrible

<sup>220</sup> See an Indian example in RV X.121.1ff.

<sup>221</sup> See another *locus classicus* in RV I.164.46 (and X.114.5).

occurs. Man cannot help but struggle with the Gods—not out of hatred or envy, but because this is apparently part of the universal dynamism that can be observed in the subatomic and molecular world, in living organisms, and in the spiritual world. Antagonism, tension, and struggle are part of life. We must also struggle with the Gods so that the necessary tension and cosmic dynamism may go on. Greek and Hindū religions alike offer us grand examples of this fundamental human attitude. Even in the Bible, Abraham has to argue with God,<sup>222</sup> Jacob fight with a mysterious theophany,<sup>223</sup> and Moses all but play the role of YHWH's blackmailer,<sup>224</sup> without mentioning the non-Jewish Job.

But how could one struggle with God the Absolute Being? This would not only be blasphemy, it would be suicide, besides being meaningless. Now, if man has no recourse against God—if there is no way out from the closed, finite world of man, because above it there is only the celestial dome of a perfect, and hence immutable, God—then the full responsibility and weight of existence, of evil, and of unsolved and insoluble problems falls back on wretched man. Man, with a single God, the Supreme Being, with neither Gods nor angels nor demons, finds himself alone, cut off, alienated, weighed down by the whole burden of existence in the presence of a Being against Whom he has no recourse; He is perfect, He allows no contradiction, He is infinitely wise, He is infallible, He has done everything well and cannot repent. Popular piety (so despised by the "pure") is perfectly aware of its need for "saints," "intercessors," and "miracles," in order to have movement in the world, in order to have exceptions, privileges, favors: in a word, freedom. Alone before a perfect God, man chokes, suffocated by divine perfection. The only recourse is to "kill God" in order to find oneself. Of course, the theistic philosophers and theologians will tell us that this conception of God is incorrect. And, theoretically, they will always be right. But what counts for ordinary people is not the idea that specialists have formed of God, but the living God of their invocation, His popular image at hand that they can deal with daily. Besides, the apologetical, philosophical, and theological defenses that develop an increasingly perfect concept of God obtain only the opposite effect: all that man was striving to bear and take personal responsibility for will be thrown back onto God.

As we have seen, if God is absolute Being, then ultimately all of the aporias, essential and existential, of human life will be on God's charge. When all is said and done, it is God who must offer a solution to the problem of evil, of suffering, of death, of broken lives and failed existences. It is God who must take on the burden of all that is human. This, however, represents a contradiction, as we see from the examples we have cited: God is happy, at peace, and in everlasting joy while Man, who is struggling to survive, suffers and fails.<sup>225</sup> What repercussions can the human condition have on an unmoved, immutable, and yet good and omnipotent God? It is no surprise, then, that man should wish to do without God. Atheism and Christianity are both at the gates.

Now, with the elimination of a God who is Substance and Supreme Being—for such is the issue—and with atheism at the gate, the situation is not greatly improved. Quite the contrary, in fact. God may have been or appeared to be no more than a handy bourgeois solution for

<sup>222</sup> Gen 15:1ff.

<sup>223</sup> Gen 32:25ff.

<sup>224</sup> Cf. Ex 32.11ff.; Num 11:11; etc.

<sup>225</sup> See the expression of the First Vatican Council: "[Deus] in se et ex se beatissimus, et super omnia, quae praeter ipsum sunt et concipi possunt, ineffabiliter excelsus" [(God) in and of himself most blessed, and ineffably exalted above all that exists or may be conceived outside of Him"] (Denzinger and Schönmetzer [1967], §1782).

so many of the problems of modern human life, yet He at least represented a hypothesis that, once accepted, did indeed become an ultimate point of reference and solved many problems. Left to himself, without his Gods and without God, man simply "cannot make it" and must forge all sorts of idols in order to survive. Atheism is powerful when it comes to destroying a certain conception of God, yet it betrays its impotence the moment it attempts to transform itself into a vision of the world that would replace what it has destroyed. Then it can be said that the cure is worse than the disease.

Let us stop a moment on this last point. What is it that atheism actually denies?

### The Theological Argument

We now leave aside our historical and religious perspective and enter into the heart of atheism itself. If we keep in mind, not the concept of "God" that atheism makes the object of its assaults, but rather the "something" that consistently "underlies" the name itself, we can safely assert that the true atheist can scarcely deny "that" of which the theist professes the existence. How could one deny that which, by definition, constitutes the very possibility of thinking, the foundation of both the principle of noncontradiction and of the man who makes use of it? What the atheist will certainly deny is that "that" is precisely God, and what the theist will affirm is that "that" is (also) God.<sup>226</sup> If we use the distinction between "material" concept and "formal" concept in the same way, we might agree that the formal concept of the Divinity is not based on the idea of Substance or Supreme Being, but consists in something previous. Indeed, it seems to us that it would be possible to formulate a kind of *theological argument*, not to prove the actual existence of God, but merely to define his place in human experience.

Too often discussions of atheism depend on the theistic and especially on the monotheistic argumentation. Only from the point of view of theism are those who believe in A (god) defined as "believers" and those who do not believe in A, although they certainly believe in B (matter, for example), as "unbelievers," although the verb "believe" may be conceived in different ways in virtue of the supposed nature of A and B. Refusing to consider atheism as an antimonotheism or as something negative, in spite of its name, but as a position as affirmative as theism, leads us to attempt to present the *theological argument*.<sup>227</sup>

This argument, in fact, seeks common ground for a theism-atheism dialogue with no

<sup>226</sup> Ortiz-Osés (1994) rightly writes, "A myth can be overcome only by a myth, a symbol by another symbol, god by god" (p. 224). We refer to this background of awareness deeper than conceptual thinking.

<sup>227</sup> I imagine that Xavier Zubiri would call it theological. "The theological aspect has meaning inasmuch as it enriches the understanding of the divine dimension it seeks to define. The theological dimension involves *God Himself*" (Zubiri [1985], p. 12). It is a matter of definition. According to the tradition that defines faith, hope, and charity as theological (rather than theological) virtues inasmuch as they have God as object or motive, I maintain the formulation "theological argument" that I used in the first edition of this work. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q.62—although strictly speaking "virtutes theologicae" can be translated both as theological or theological virtues. "Objectum autem theologiarum virtutum est ipse Deus, qui est ultimus rerum finis, prout nostrae rationis cognitionem excedit" [Object of theological (theological) virtues is God himself, who is the ultimate end of things, inasmuch as He is the comprehension of our reason] (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q.62, a.2). Hence the classical definition of virtue in Augustine (*De libero arbitrio* II.19 [PL 32:1268]) as that "qualitas mentis . . . quam Deus in nobis sine nobis operatur" [Virtue is that "quality of the mind . . . that God works in us without us," characteristic of course of the so-called infused virtues listed by Peter Lombard (*Sententiae* book 1, dist. 27, c. 5).

advantages for either part.<sup>228</sup> On the contrary, it assumes that the distinction between believers and nonbelievers derives from power issues.

The point of departure of our theological argument will not be the Anselmian definition of God as "something of which nothing greater can be thought," but will simply develop a deontologized description of what the word "God" wants to *express*, setting aside the content of being that each thinker may wish to endow it with. "God is that something of which nothing lesser can be thought." That is why we can define Him as an argument ("what is clear shines like gold, O Arjuna!"). What is in question is the very foundation of all discussion, of all dialogue.

Now, when we say "God" we think of many things—but we refer to "something" (which naturally need not be necessarily "reified" as a substantial *quid*, nor as a real entity) without which one can neither be nor think. This "God" is desire to one who desires, the basis of thought to one who thinks, Being to that which is, Person to the person, Logos to the speaker, Love to the lover, the One to the multiple, Nothingness to the contingent nothings, Matter to materialists, Spirit to the spiritualists, the State, Man, the Absolute, the Absurd, Non-Existence, Evil, and so on. This "God" would be simply the Great Fish to fish, Life to plants, and so forth.

Let me be very clear: by no means am I saying that such *notions* are all equivalent. I am merely saying that they all refer to "something" whose existence we call into question. We consider legitimate that an insuperable cloud of unknowing surrounds its essence at least initially: "something" that cannot be denied because it lies at the core and foundation of all negation, the theist will say; that "something" of which nothing can be said because it corresponds to no being, the atheist will say. Both, however, must recognize that they are formulating the same problem, if they do not want to sink into a mere verbal discussion. What the theist affirms is a certain characteristic of this something: that it exists, or that it is good, or that it is creator and directs the destinies of the world, or suchlike. What the atheist denies are only these assertions. Neither does the theist *affirm* what his very affirmation is based upon, nor does the atheist *deny* the very condition of his negation. Because we have no terms available to express the nakedness of this "something," it may seem to us that the theist and the atheist are at opposite ends of an ontic plane, whereas in reality their dispute is only ontological. In other words, what is under discussion is not the subject—for then there could be neither dialogue nor communication nor, for that matter, even contradiction—but the predicate of the sentence, "God exists."

"God exists," says the theist; "God does not exist," answers the atheist. "God is the ground and the end of all things," upholds the believer; "God is a chimera of the mind and an illicit extrapolation of the human mind," says the atheist. As for the subject—God—however, they all agree that He is what they are speaking about. And here we have what I would call our *theological argument*, very different, as it appears, from the theistic argument that, to prove its own point, will only defend the qualifications of what St. Thomas recognized as "*quod omnes dicunt Deum*" (that all call God).<sup>229</sup> This was the consensus that atheism came to break.

This argument does not prove anything about God; it only demonstrates that both parties

<sup>228</sup> "The atheists and the theists do not generally think that their atheism and their theism may be solutions for an underlying problem. . . . God is a problem for everyone. It is a problem that touches us for the very fact of being human." This is the theological argument as outlined by Zubiri (1985), pp. 11–12, which I have called theological. If I insist in this direction, it is in order to contribute to the overcoming of the split (a mortal split in my way of thinking) between philosophy and theology.

<sup>229</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q.2, a.3. It is significant to observe that the famous five ways all end with the following refrain: "hoc omnes intelligunt, nominant, dicunt, dicimus Deum."

in the dispute are speaking of the "same," and that what is crucial is this very "something," even if the disputants thereupon attribute to it altogether different qualifications—so different, in fact, that it cannot even be said to be the "same thing." And, indeed, this "thing" is not.

The strength of the theological argument consists in showing that the discourse on God is, by definition, unique, and there is no possible comparison. The subject is beyond the attribution of existence or nonexistence. The subject of the theological argument is that which confers meaning to both propositions: "God exists" and "God does not exist."

Reducing our theological argument to its essence, it could be said, "God is 'that' whose reality some affirm and others deny." The discussion is not concerned with the character of his existence (since, as a concept, or historical force, or psychological factor, it is evident that God exists) but in the affirmation of an independent reality. The atheist is always a "realist"; herein lies his strength. The shift in the center of gravity of both thought and life from the transcendent to the immediately given is the ultimate, and healthy, characteristic of the atheistic position. Hence the atheistic negation of both the transcendence and the immanence of any "something" whose existence would seem to supplant that of the concrete, immediate man. The theist, by contrast, is ever the transcendentalist, in reason, sentiment, faith, and so on, since ultimately the theist will assert the existence of something higher than, and hence transcending, what the immediate data of consciousness will testify. The strength of theism lies in its acknowledgment of the anthropological openness to the infinite.

Theological reasoning does not and cannot claim to reconcile atheists and theists. It can, however, show us not only that the propositions of the discussion signify something (because both parties are "talking about the same thing"), but also that, by definition, the real core of the discussion is untouched, so to speak, by theistic affirmation and atheistic negation alike. If "there is" a God, in virtue of the very characteristics that distinguish Him morphologically from all of the other objects of our experience, such God is independent of epistemological acknowledgment, positive or negative, on the part of humankind. Neither affirmation nor negation in any way regards God.<sup>230</sup> We must not forget, moreover, even from a sheer methodological viewpoint, that the question of God is not open to the same manner of approach as are intra-mundane problems. It is not our task here, however, to examine the problem of atheism in all its complex variety.

There are a great many types of atheism, of course, and more or less complete classifications abound. I shall limit my own considerations to the central notion that atheism denies the affirmation of God made by theism or by any other system asserting God's existence.

Second (without for the moment entering upon a disquisition concerning the possible meanings of the concept of existence), one of the basic characteristics of atheism is that it denies God the characteristic of Being. God "is" not for the simple reason that God is neither Being (for some), nor Supreme Being (for others). God is toppled from the throne of Being: thereby, for some, God is eliminated; for others, on the contrary, the dethroning involves a purification of the very idea of God.<sup>231</sup>

The theological argument identifies God's particular "space": God is that which cannot be denied; God is that special subject beyond all predicates, even those of existence and nonexistence. Discussion of God belongs to the plane of human disputes, not to God's plane. One may discuss whether God is a simple idea of our mind, a postulate of our reason, a projection of our desires; but in each case, one is speaking of the same thing, or of something (which indeed can be regarded as unreal) that, strictly speaking, is not

<sup>230</sup> See my contribution to the UNESCO workshop (Paris 1962), in Panikkar (1963/22).

<sup>231</sup> See Marion (1991); without reciprocal influence we have reached similar conclusions: "Dieu a-t-il à gagner à être?" (p. 11).



attained by human predicates, which have the function of clarifying conceptual content. That "that" is God, the theist will say. That "that" is not God, the atheist will say. The discussion of God then becomes a discussion of God's attributes, including what can only be a predicate: his being.<sup>232</sup>

### *Negation of Non-Being (Apophatism)*

Long before atheism introduced a series of basic correctives to the idea of God, a whole orientation of thought, with ties to mystical apophatism, consistently maintained that the best knowledge to be had of the Incomprehensible is to know that we neither know nor can know it adequately.<sup>233</sup> This school of thought even went so far as to defend the dimension of God's absence as his most fundamental characteristic.<sup>234</sup> God is the one who is absent and always absent, to the point that were He ever indeed to appear, the divine presence would not be of the divine essence, but only a manifestation, a veil, the mere shadow of His being, a pre-essence.<sup>235</sup> Besides, the true essence of God is not, in that Being itself is God's first veil—his first epiphany, but not the Godhead. Nor even God knows Himself, would assert a daring formulation.<sup>236</sup> Meister Eckhart speaks, as a comment to the last eschatological revelation (Rom 8:18), of three veils of divine glory, the last of which is the very veil of Being.<sup>237</sup>

### *The Apophatic Argument*

According to a number of traditions, God is not only Being, but also Non-Being, characterised by Non-Being. Strictly speaking, He is beyond Being and Non-Being, however self-contradictory this formulation may be.<sup>238</sup> Silence, then, is the preferred vehicle of this mystique. The only ones contemplating God are those who do not contemplate

<sup>232</sup> See the often repeated Kantian proposition, "Sein ist offenbar kein reales Prädikat. . . ." *Kant Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 598, B 626. See Heidegger (1987), pp. 5–9, for a concise comment.

<sup>233</sup> For the series of texts that uphold these propositions, see Panikkar (1971/XII); Nicolas (1966).

<sup>234</sup> "God is near to us in His absence as He is light to us in His darkness," Porete (1993); Hadewijch Anversa: "à mesure que leur connaissance se renouvelle sans mode dans la claire ténèbre, dans la présence d'absence" [inasmuch as their knowledge is renewed in the clear darkness, in the presence of absence] (*Mengeldichten* 17.133).

<sup>235</sup> "God cannot be comprehended by the mind, inasmuch as whatever can be comprehended of God is surely not God" (or according to the Latin version, "Deus mente comprehendi non potest. Nam si in comprehensionem cadit, Deus certe non est") (Evagrius, *De Octo vitiosis cogitationibus* [PG 40:1275C]. Cf. also Maximus the Confessor, *Scholia in Dionysio Areopagita, In Epistulam* 1 [PG 4:529A].

<sup>236</sup> "Deus itaque nescit se quid est, quia non est quid" [God does not know what He is because He is not something] (John Scotus, *De divisione naturae* II.28 [PL 122:589]). In this very work and a little further (30), he repeats the same doctrine, calling God "pure nothing." *Brahman* does not know about being *Brahman*; the one who knows is *Īśvara*, its equal, the Vedānta says.

<sup>237</sup> Cf. Eckhart, *Sermo* XI.2: "Vel dic: revelabitur gloria, quia in beatitudine ipsa gloria revelatur. Tollitur omne velamen—quod nomen glorie importat—sicut etiam velamen boni, sub quo accipit voluntas, velamen veri, cum quo accipit intellectus, et universaliter velamen ipsius esse" [Or say: the glory shall be revealed, since in the "blessedness" (ultimately, in the beatific vision or in the last and final stage of man) the selfsame glory is revealed (unveiled). All veils are removed—since the very name of glory implies this—even the veil of goodness under which the will (from God) receives; the veil of intellection, which allows the intellect to receive (Him), and in a total manner the very veil of Being] (*Sermo* XI.2 [§120]; LW, p. 4:114). This and other parallel texts would deserve a commentary. Cf. Panikkar (1991/XXXI), pp. 4ff.

<sup>238</sup> See, e.g., in the area of Indian spirituality, RV X.129; AV IV.1; SU IV.18; BG IX.19; XIII.12 (*Brahman* source of being and non-being), etc.

God, as one representative of this approach goes as far as saying.<sup>239</sup> The ultimate reality is transcendent—so transcendent, in fact, as to transcend being; the ultimate reality not even *is*, several mystical schools affirm. Consider, for example, the neo-Platonists.<sup>240</sup> The issue is no longer transcendence, limited to the forms of thinking and being of man: but absolute transcendence, to the point that, transcending transcendence itself, ultimate reality ceases to *be* transcendent: it ceases to *be* altogether.<sup>241</sup> "Blessed be those who have reached infinite ignorance."<sup>242</sup> Concerning God, "the more is known the less one knows [since] in Him ignorance is true wisdom."<sup>243</sup>

We know of an "ontological argument" asserting that God is that something of which nothing greater can be thought,<sup>244</sup> and we have formulated a *theological argument* upholding that God is that something that cannot be denied. But there is also an *apophatic argument*, whose *cataphatic* translation would say that God is that something that by nature cannot be known, whose existence cannot be thought, that transcends all our thoughts and all our modes of *thinking* Being and also of *being*.<sup>245</sup>

This attitude, which can have a mystical, agnostic, or merely secular form, says that it is impossible to talk of the absolute and that any formulation is not only a translation but a betrayal of that reality that transcends even Being. The negation includes both the being and the non-being of God, inasmuch as any human formulation implies the horizon of non-being since any formulation is always a limitation, inasmuch as it succeeds in affirming only by virtue of a limited horizon against which it is possible to affirm something. If, then, all of our affirmations are constitutively imbued with non-being, the only way to approach God would be through the negation of our radical negativity.

The force of the *apophatic argument* is based on overcoming the Parmenidean principle that has become dominant in the West. In spite of the different ways in which the relationship between Being and Thinking has been interpreted, its character of bi-univocal principle has hardly been questioned by the dominant Western culture, since the alternative seemed irrationalism: if thinking does not tell us what Being is, then men will drop the reins of being, everything will be possible, and chaos will prevail. The example of God is paradigmatic: if God is not thinkable, then He is not. It is the same argument as idealism: pure multiplicity is unthinkable, "therefore" impossible, that is, is not.

The apophatic way of facing the issue is simply by taking stock of the unthinkability of the Divine, thus abstaining from any conclusion without seeking the "excuse" of attributing unthinkability to the weakness of our knowledge.

What does the apophatic thesis uphold? Obviously it upholds nothing; it remains silent.

<sup>239</sup> Cf. KenU II.2–3.

<sup>240</sup> The bibliography is immense. Cf. only Plotinus's *hyperion* and Proclus's *spërma mé ontos*, etc., accepted also by Christian tradition. Cf., e.g., Seyppel (1963); Bernhart (1967); Haas (1979); Haas-Stirnimann (1980).

<sup>241</sup> See Theodorakopoulos (1976); Beierwaltes (1991), with a selected bibliography to which we also refer.

<sup>242</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *III Centuria* 88. See Hausherr (1936).

<sup>243</sup> [De Deo] "qui melius nesciendo scitur: cuius ignorantia vera est sapientia" (John Scotus, *De divisione naturae* I.510 b).

<sup>244</sup> See, for the modern approach, two studies of different orientation: Hartshorne (1965) and Warnach (1962), pp. 337–57. For a useful anthology from Anselm to the present day, see Hick and McGill (1967); and for a contemporary reflection, Olivetti (1990).

<sup>245</sup> We could sum up the three attitudes with the three maxims: "Deus est id quo maius cogitari nequit; id minus quam quod cogitari nequit; id quod cogitari nequit" [God is that of which nothing greater can be thought; that of which nothing lesser can be thought; that which cannot be thought].

But it is not a silence abstaining from speaking, evaluating, affirming; it is a silence surrounded by thought, similar to that "seed of nothingness," Proclus's *sperma me ontos* (σπέρμα μὴ ὄντος) in the hope that the seed may bear fruit.

Last, one could reduce everything to something simpler: if the discourse on God is sui generis, since God is neither a species of any kind nor a specimen of some super-species, the discourse on the Divine is unique, incomparable, and cannot be related to anything else similar; it is therefore incomprehensible, inasmuch as it cannot be reduced to any parameter. One cannot have faith in what one knows, as medieval Scholasticism used to say.

This means that the apophatic reasoning cannot contradict itself, because it says nothing. Yet it cannot affirm itself either, since it makes no attempt to do so.<sup>246</sup>

In what does it then consist? Ray of darkness, wise ignorance, cloud of unknowing, infinite ignorance, third eye, vision beyond the intellect, infused super-science, ineffable experience, and so forth are the many other expressions within tradition.

"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8—and no other Evangelist dares record this).<sup>247</sup> What a pure undeformed heart sees, however, is what is found right in front of the eyes. "Teach me the way," said a monk to the master Chao-chou (778–897 AD)—"Have you eaten?"—"Yes."—"Then go and wash the dishes (you have used)," replied Chao-chou. *Samsāra* is *nirvāṇa*, since "God is among the pots." Probably this is thinking beyond the ontological difference.<sup>248</sup>

Something should be immediately added here. The unthinkable is such because it cannot be thought. Thinking cannot reach the unthinkable, but human consciousness can register its presence in the very terms of something unthinkable. We do not say that the unthinkable as such can be thought, but that we can reach a special "knowledge" of the unthinkable.

Apophatic reasoning is not pure irrationality. It was said of old that it was possible to have knowledge of the existence of God without having necessarily to know His essence. Apophatic reasoning goes further: it says it is possible to be conscious of ineffability.

We will add one more thing: such consciousness is possible only because it is not isolated, because alongside it there is a cataphatic consciousness. The discrediting of so-called mysticism is due to the fact that too often it has been seen as separated from intellectual as well as from sensible knowledge. The three eyes, to speak according to Christian and Buddhist tradition, see reality when we keep all three of them open at the same time.

### The God of Love

A modern formulation, with ancient and Christian roots, upholds that God is Love.<sup>249</sup> It even goes so far as to say, through the subtle exegesis of a second Christian text, that "Being

<sup>246</sup> We should mention in the general context of this essay an extraordinary figure of the ninth century, John Scotus, who is not only a strong interpreter of the Christian apophatic current, but may help us gain a deeper understanding of the Buddhist tradition. I do not know any specific monographic work, but from that Iron Age some important intuition might possibly reach our own Plastic age. Cf. the introduction with bibliography by E. Jeunneau in Scotus (1969) and the synthetic article by R. Roques in DS (1973).

<sup>247</sup> "Nota quam munda debet esse et quam nuda anima" [Notice how pure and how naked the soul must remain], says Eckhart (*Sermo* IX [LW, p. 4:95]), to quote but one of the central themes of Saint John of the Cross's spirituality.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. Marion (1991), pp. 70ff. and passim.

<sup>249</sup> "L'Être est Amour" [Being is Love] (Le Saux [1965], p. 189); from the same author, see also (1966), p. 159.

is Love."<sup>250</sup> Not that Being is love in virtue of an easy syllogism (God is "Being"<sup>251</sup> and God is "Love,"<sup>252</sup> therefore Being is Love), but stressing that God *is* Love precisely because God is-not Being; God "is" love, and love is-not being nor is being love. Being is self-assertion; love is self-immolation. If God is pure love, he would not be love hypostatized in a substance. Such substantialization of the Divine is what gives origin to the well-known antinomies of *bhakti*: if there are two "beings" (substances) that love each other, there can never be total oneness, but love's aspiration is the very overcoming of such dualism; if, however, the lover and the loved one are confused into the same substance, love itself disappears. Monism destroys love. However, the dualism (of two loving substances) leads to the frustration of love and reduces it to an illusion. Now we understand the propositions of the *bhakti* mysticism of all times, with its defense against monism and its protestations against dualism. The *advaita* solution, however, calls for the desubstantialization of Being. It is, therefore, a love without support, without substance, without "beings" loving each other: a pure love, a movement of approach and union, the breath of love, the loving dimension of all things, thereupon discovered to be not a mere dimension among so many others, but the very constitutive element of things. Things "are" insofar as they love.

The difficulty with this vision lies in the danger of a simplifying sentimentalism that reduces the Divine to a simple rarefied effusion. God would thus become a mere psychological motion, and instead of having a radical apophatism, we would fall into a kind of amorphous pantheism.<sup>253</sup>

What we have, however, is an attempt to deontologize the Being of God without having to lose Him altogether.<sup>254</sup> The strength of this intuition consists in the fact that it overcomes the *logomanism* introducing a love (the Spirit) not submitted to *logos*. We find along these lines<sup>255</sup> the Trinitarian vision of the Divine. In any case, apophatism cannot settle for a simple transposition from Being to Love.

### The Absent God

The characteristic of every apophatism, as regards our problem, consists in the negation of any proposition about God, seeing that any proposition made by us finite, limited beings is, in fact, never a real affirmation but a simple delimitation against a broader horizon—hence

<sup>250</sup> "If I have not love, I am not" (ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθεν εἶμι) (1 Cor 13:2; without love I am not, I do not exist, I am nothing).

<sup>251</sup> Ex 3:14, according to the traditional interpretation.

<sup>252</sup> 1 Jn 4:8.

<sup>253</sup> This would be the possible criticism of a certain New Age spirituality that would be limited to "states of (psychological) consciousness." See Sloterdijk (1993), p. 42, and the now classic Zaenher (1957), and for an overall formulation, Bochinger's dissertation (1992). We shall not take in any way a position on a movement that is far from being homogeneous.

<sup>254</sup> See Panikkar (1983/XXVII) and the chapter "Advaita and Bhakti," pp. 278–89.

<sup>255</sup> Cf. the repeated propositions of the Greek and Latin Church Fathers, and their formulation by Eckhart (*Sermo* XI.2 (§118)): "Deus autem ab omni numero proprie eximitur. Est enim unus sine unitate, trinus sine trinitate, sicut bonus sine qualitate, etc. Est enim 'super omne nomen,' rationem et intellectum et super esse et ens, cuius differentia est numerus, et omnia huiusmodi" [God, however, is properly speaking beyond any number. He is, in fact, one without unity, trine without trinity, good but without quality (attributes), etc. He is certainly "above any name" (Phil 2:9), reason and intellect but also above (any) Being and (any) entity, the difference from which is the number, and (is found above) any (other) similar thing] (LW, p. 4:112). See the Toledo Council echoed by Eckhart: "Nec recte dici potest, ut in uno Deo sit Trinitas, sed unus Deus Trinitas" (Denzinger and Schönmetzer [1967], §528: "Ut in tribus personis non possit esse plurale" (ibid., §530 [It cannot be correctly said that the Trinity is in one God but it must be said a God trinity . . . so that in the three persons no plural may be meant])).

the use of the category of absence, which I have already cited, and which is used to express this very concept.<sup>256</sup>

According to this perspective, "all words are inadequate, including the mind."<sup>257</sup> God is always absent. Any presence of God is precisely this: a pre-essence, a veil, a manifestation, and thereby a deformation, or at best a figuration. A God who is not absent is simply an Idol. *Resurrexit, non est hic* (He is risen, He is not here).<sup>258</sup> God is always the one risen from the dead and absent among the living. Not that he is everywhere (how?) but, strictly speaking, He is no-where, He is pure absence, nonexistence. The presence of God is only for revealing His absence, His *ab-esse*. God is not an *esse-ad*—a being present and turned toward things—but an *esse-ab*, a "being" from which beings draw their origin. Strictly speaking, God neither has nor is *esse*, but "is" an *esse-ab*, an ab-sence, a non-being from which beings take their origin.<sup>259</sup> Hence *extasis*, emergence from oneself, loss of being, genuine *ek-stasis*, is the only path to the attainment of the Absent One and reuniting with Him. "Unless you lose your own life . . ."<sup>260</sup>

It should be clear that we are not dealing with a strategic absence, a divine self-concealing, for the purpose of attracting and purifying us. It is a matter not simply of a God hidden from the furtive glances of human beings, a spatial absence, but of an absence of being, of essence: a true *ab-esse*, an *Ab-wesenheit* (and not precisely a *Nichtgegenwärtigkeit*). Yet neither should this absence be confused with the "nothingness" of the atheist or nihilist. It is precisely absence that permits presence. It is absence that renders possible quest, change, and infinitude. Absence is not, but it is what permits to be; it is what makes it possible for presence to appear and indeed to be—in your neighbor, the Christian and other Scriptures would say.

Evidently, any attempt to force such interpretation dialectically would dissolve God into a mere possibility of thinking and being: a possibility that, deprived of all ontological density, would lead to the seeking of epistemological justifications, or a right to logical existence. But this is not our aim when we discuss the meta-ontological aspect of the absence of God. Aware of the pitfalls that lie in the abuse of paradox, however, I am tempted to say that God is the ever-present absence and, on the other hand, the ever-absent presence. God "is" never what is thought, neither what "is"; then again, God is always present in what is thought, and indeed is ultimately and definitively at the core of all that in any way "is."

### The Transparent God

Another way to attempt stammering something about this issue is to speak of *transparency*. God is transparent, a pure transparency that allows us to see things and reality as they are. And this is another favorite theme of mysticism: "God's being is nakedness without any veil."<sup>261</sup>

<sup>256</sup> See Chuang Tzu (1976, 22.8) and see Thomas Merton's English translation, (1965). "This is the furthest yet! Who can reach it? / I can comprehend the absence of Being / But who can comprehend the absence of Nothing? / Yet Non-being Is, / Who can reach it?"

<sup>257</sup> TU II.4.1 (II.9).

<sup>258</sup> *Οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλο, ἡγέρθη*, Mt 28:6.

<sup>259</sup> Cf. "All the things of the universe arrive at being from an origin in being; but being arrives at being from non-being"; *Tao-te-ching* XL, or, as some translate, "Nothingness is the origin of all beings."

<sup>260</sup> Cf. Mk 8:35 and the many parallel passages.

<sup>261</sup> "Esse autem deus esse nudum sine velamine est" (Eckhart, *Sermo* XI.1 [§115]; LW, p. 4:108). A favorite theme with Eckhart, who speaks of the *ens nudum* (*Sermo* XVII.2 [§169]), commenting elsewhere, "Debet igitur anima [se] exuere omnibus, ut nuda nudum quaerat deum, nihil aliud in ipso" [The soul must be able to divest itself of all things, so that in nakedness it may seek the naked God and nothing else but Him] (*Sermo* XXIV.2 [§246]; LW, p. 4:225).

This divine transparency is what determines that God "is" what breaks the walls of our isolation while respecting our solitude. God is no obstacle, does not spy on us with a never closing eye, troubling us with His looking. The ancients described God as "the opposition to nothingness with the mediation of entity."<sup>262</sup>

It is this transparency or absence that once again helps to clarify what we have already said in quoting briefly the equation *saṃsāra = nirvāṇa*.

*Age quod agis*, the Latins used to say: "Do what you are doing," similar to Oratio's *carpe diem*, and not dissimilar from the evangelical exhortation to live day by day.<sup>263</sup> God is not the other and is not identified with things; He is beyond the ontological difference.

### The God of Forgiveness

Another category (if we must give it a name) that can offer us some hint toward the understanding of the problem is the category of *forgiveness*. This is a theme that we have barely mentioned, and it may offer us a key to clarifying at least one aspect of the "problem of God." According to the Christian Scripture only God can forgive; the experience of forgiveness, therefore, is a homeomorphic equivalent of the experience of God. A number of people claiming to be atheists have told how they experienced a superior force, which did not come from themselves and which was capable of erasing a certain reality, thanks to the fact that they had been enabled to forgive. If we are beings, God is not, strictly speaking. Being, nor indeed an entity, for any entity, by the mere fact of being, is givenness, a gift, for-giveness, donation of being: being *is* the gift (of being) that is for-given (for being); each being has come to be. Being means both existing and being-thought, it is *being-forgiven*. Being is not the ultimate or, rather, it is the ultimate for us, since beyond the frontier of being there is no being. Being, therefore, is originated, bestowed, forgiven. The forgiver, who is-not, but who for-gives (being) would be God. Creating means forgiving—forgiving being so that it may be, bestowing on it the gift of being: forgiveness. God would be pure Gift and remain a mystery.

First of all, a being giving being to himself does not enter into our field of experience. Neither is it conceivable since if what is given (what is for-given) is being, the giver cannot yet be; he must "be" Nothing.

From Plotinus's *aíton eautou* (αἶτον ἑαυτοῦ)<sup>264</sup> to Heidegger,<sup>265</sup> the expression *causa sui* has been a well-known currency in Western philosophy either because it was rejected,<sup>266</sup>

<sup>262</sup> "Deus est oppositio ad nihil mediatione entis," *Liber XXIV Philosophorum*, prop. 14, quoted by tradition (Meister Eckhart, *Sermo* VI.1 §53; Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia* II.2, etc.).

<sup>263</sup> Mt 6:25–34, to be compared with Phil 4:6 and many other texts.

<sup>264</sup> *Enneades* IV.8 (§14.41). Strictly speaking, §§13 and 14 should be included. The whole treatise VI.8 deals with the freedom and will of the One. It seems that Plotinus was the first to say, "God is cause of Himself, for Himself, and in Himself. He is the one who is: the first Self, the transcendently Self" (ibid.), if we follow MacKenna's version.

<sup>265</sup> Heidegger (1957), p. 64. This would be the God of philosophy that the believer cannot worship, as we have shown.

<sup>266</sup> See Kant (1960), p. 1:430. It is worth quoting the concision of a master. He wants to demonstrate the following proposition: "Existential suae rationem aliquid habere in se ipso, absolum est" [It is not convenient that something may hold the reason of its existence in itself]. And offers the following explanation: "Quidquid enim rationem existentialis alicuius rei in se continet, huius causa est. Pone igitur aliquid esse, quod existentialis suae rationem haberet in se ipso, tum sui ipsius causa esset. Quoniam vero causae notio natura sit prior notione causati, et haec illa posterior: idem se ipso prius simulque posterius esset, quod est absurdum" [Something holding in itself the reason for the existence of anything is its cause. If you suppose that something holds in itself the reason for its own existence,

judged,<sup>267</sup> differentiated,<sup>268</sup> or even accepted.<sup>269</sup> As the footnotes suggest, the concept can be accepted or rejected according to the acceptance or rejection of the priority and greater reality of the world of essence as compared to the world of existence. What is at play is a previous notion of reality and therefore of deity<sup>270</sup>—hence the connection with the ontological argument.

God can only give existence to Himself if there is a Divine essence that causes His existence. If we would rather affirm that essence and existence are one and the same there is no longer any reason to say that the one causes the other—God would simply be uncaused.

Our interest, however, is focused on the deontologization of God.

Let me put it another way. It is written, "to whom little is forgiven the same love the little."<sup>271</sup> In other words, he who has been forgiven more, loves more. More being means more forgiveness. Existence, being, is forgiveness, being pardoned for non-being (neither God nor anything). When we are given being, what is given to us is not nothing; we are simply pardoned for not-being, for not being God. Who can give being? God can still give Himself (in the Trinity), or can forgive for not having (yet) given Himself to Himself (in creation). This forgiveness, this pardon is what we call being. Creation, the making of something that is not God, is God's "sin," God's sacrifice.<sup>272</sup> In Latin *donum* means sacrifice—the gift that is given and that is forgiven. Non-God is sin, and we are this transition between God and nothingness.<sup>273</sup> The *simul iustus et peccator* of tradition and of Christian controversies acquires in this context its theological depth.<sup>274</sup>

God's pardon goes hand in hand with His giving. God gives me "being": He pardons my not being (yet) God. For Man to love is really to give back what he has been given. The more the forgiveness the greater the love, because love is the response to forgiveness, to pardon. That

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then it would be the cause of itself. So, if we admit that the notion of cause naturally precedes what is caused, and this latter is posterior, the selfsame thing would be both anterior and posterior to itself, which is absurd]. See also Schopenhauer (1980) in its criticism of Spinoza.

<sup>267</sup> See Descartes in his *Primae* and *Quartae Responsiones*.

<sup>268</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, who refuses the Neoplatonic notion (*Contra Gentes* I.22; *De veritate* 24.1) and transforms it in the *aseity* proper to God.

<sup>269</sup> Spinoza, whose definition is classic: "Per causam sui intelligo id, cuius essentia involvit existentiam; sive id, cuius natura non potest concipi, nisi existens" [As cause of itself I intend anything in which its essence includes its existence, or the nature of which cannot be conceived as other than existing] (*Ethica* I.1 [def. 1]; Spinoza [1979–1980], p. 2:86). The most coherent will be Hegel. See his *Wissenschaft der Logik*.

<sup>270</sup> Cf. Plotinus: "Any thing to which existence can be attributed is either at one with its essence or different from it. The individual man is distinct from the essence of man . . . but Man as a species is the same as the essence of man" (*Enneades* VI.8.14.1ff.).

<sup>271</sup> See Lk 7:47.

<sup>272</sup> See 2 Cor 5:21.

<sup>273</sup> Nothingness is inherent to creatures, repeats Thomas Aquinas, *De aeternitate mundi*: "Prius enim inest unicuique naturaliter quod convenit sibi in se, quam quod solum ex alio habet. Esse autem non habet creatura nisi ab alio, sibi autem relicta in se considerata nihil est: unde prius naturaliter inest sibi nihil quam esse" [What is inherent to all things in a natural manner belongs to it before it receives it from another. The creature has no being except from another; left to itself, considered in itself, it is nothing; therefore nothingness is in it before being]. See also *De potentia* q.5, a.1c; *De veritate* q.8, a.16 ad 12. "Creatura est tenebra in quantum est ex nihilo" [The creature is darkness inasmuch as it proceeds from nothingness], says also *De veritate* q.18, a.2–5.

<sup>274</sup> See 1 Jn 1:8–10.

is why we were loved first.<sup>275</sup> I am to the extent that I love, because I love to the extent that I have been forgiven, and it is this divine forgiveness that constitutes my being. I am a divine forgiveness: a moment in the Trinitarian adventure, a unique and therefore indispensable moment, with its own dignity—yet a transitory moment that, receiving forgiveness, redeems it by leaving existence so that others may carry it on, since I have been resurrected (to Divine life). This is the *perichoresis* of which we shall speak later.

Spirit is the plenary gift: creature is the partial gift, temporary, the incomplete provision, so to speak: it is up to Man to cooperate so that it may turn into the plenary gift of the Spirit.

In other words, being is a transitive verb: being is given (and constitutes us) as non-being is forgiven us and to this we respond with immolation, self-sacrifice, the gift of that very donation to resurrect a Life "beyond" being, we could say. When a creature refuses to restore this gift, when it prevents it and does not return it, when it forges an ego for itself and thereby loses being a *thou*, when it does not want to be forgiven—when, therefore, it does not love, then it sins. Sin is shutting oneself off, it is the *amor curvus* (twisted love), that is, "unlove," because it ceases to be ecstatic and turns in upon itself. To pardon sin is to pardon existence: left to itself, without recourse, without a hand to draw it from its nothingness, the creature is lost, wanders, fails to return, stops, sins.<sup>276</sup>

Now, to be forgiven, I must repent. But I cannot repent if I believe in the positivity of my own being.<sup>277</sup> I can repent only if I repent for not-being, not being God, possessing still an "I" that prevents me from ceasing to be, that does not allow me to free myself from the limits of my being.<sup>278</sup> It is then that the sacrifice of Christ, in taking away the "sin of the world," becomes the path of atonement for the "sin" of creation.<sup>279</sup> The experience of repentance is, therefore, possible only for those who, in a certain way, have perceived that the human being has not yet reached what he could and should be; ultimately, for those who discover nonactualized potentialities—yet not for this reason ontologizing sin.

<sup>275</sup> See *ibid.*, 4:19.

<sup>276</sup> Cf. in a Christian context: "Creation is not self-sustaining," says Gregory the Great. "Sunt enim haec omnia, sed principiata non sunt, quia in semetipsis minime subsistunt, et nisi gubernantis manu teneantur, esse nequaquam possunt. . . . Cuncta namque in illo subsistunt; a qui creata sunt neque ea quae vivunt suis nutibus ad morum ducuntur; sed ille cuncta mover, qui quodam vivificat, quodam vero non vivificata in extremam essentiam mire ordinas servat" [All of these things are, but principally they are not, for they by no means subsist in themselves, and if the hand of the one governing does not sustain them, in no wise can they be. For they all subsist in the one who has created them. Nor do living things move under their own power; rather the one who now bestows life, now does not, moves them all toward the extreme essence, and wondrously preserves them in their order] (*Moralia* XVI.37.45). Or again: "Omnia in nihilum deciderent, si non ea manus omnipotentis teneret" [All things would fall into nothingness, did not the hand of the almighty hold them] (PL 75:1143). See also the conciliar text: "[Deus] condidit creaturas: bonas quidem, quia a summo bono factae sunt, sed mutabiles, quia de nihilo factae sunt" [(God) has made creatures: good, surely, because they have been created by the supreme good, but unstable, because they have been made from nothing] (Council of Florence, *Decretum pro Iacobitis* [Denzinger and Schönmetzer (1967)], §1333). This text is taken almost verbatim from St. Augustine in *De Natura Boni* X (PL 42:554–55).

<sup>277</sup> This perspective allows a more correct interpretation of numerous texts of the Christian Scriptures seemingly so ridden with anthropological pessimism, if we consider them as expressing a mere ontological situation: the fact that positivity and truth reside only on the other shore. We refer to texts such as Jn 12:24–25; Mt 10:39; Mk 8:35; etc.

<sup>278</sup> Kierkegaard discerned something of this when he wrote in *Enten-Eller* that "lovè for God has an absolute particularity, and its expression is repentance."

<sup>279</sup> See Jn 1:29.



## Existence as Debt

This conception of "creatureliness" as something that must be mastered and overcome is common to most traditional religions.

This is the case, for example, of the Vedic notion of human existence as the debt that constitutes precisely what the human being is on this earth.<sup>280</sup> Accordingly, the primordial duty of man is that of paying or cancelling these debts to the ancestors, to the *devas*, and to other men.<sup>281</sup>

In this perspective, the so-called Enlightenment of Europe and modernity could also be defined as the loss of the sense of sacrifice, that is, the loss of the sense of human existence as an exchange (*commercium* in Latin Christian liturgy) between the Divine world and the human world still in the travails of birth. We do not, obviously, mean to defend the abuse of the traditional concept by religious institutions—abuse that explains and partly justifies the healthy reaction of modernity.<sup>282</sup>

This interpretation will also shed more meaning on the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.<sup>283</sup> There is no way out: those who declare themselves to be just, by that very fact, cease to be so; in like manner, those who recognize themselves as sinners, by this very acknowledgment attain justification. The just, therefore, cannot acknowledge themselves as such. When we become conscious of our own being we must also realize that being itself is debt, since it is the gift of the one who alone can grant it; only then can we reach the other shore and be justified. Vice versa, the fact that the sinner recognizes himself as sinner does not mean that his acknowledgment is not true. Being is sin, and in its recognition as such, in its negation, in the quest for its extinguishing (the extinguishing of thirst, Śākyamuni would say), the goal of the pilgrimage is reached: precisely, the eviction of being. To have consciousness of being debtors is to discover ourselves as such. Sin occurs when being comes to a standstill, when it is substantialized, that is, when it attributes to itself a density or self-sufficiency, an *autós*, an *ātman* of its own—in other words, when being ceases to be a transitive verb gliding toward its end and is instead frozen into *esse*, into substance. Sin is the *sistence* of being that has grown weary of the tension of its constitutive *ek* and thus has transformed itself into a (false) con-sistence.<sup>284</sup>

However, if the world of being is the world of our experience, then the God of religion is found beyond being. Not that God *is* non-being, but simply that He is at the origin, He is the cause, if you wish, of being. This assertion, however, is valid only if by being we mean an ultimate privation, a *thirst*, a simple not-yet, a forgiveness.<sup>285</sup> If being were something totally positive, the cause or origin or giver of being would have to be being as well, for one does not give what one does not have. God can be beyond being only if the experience of being is not that of a total positivity but simply that of a lack. This lack is not an absolute emptiness, for

<sup>280</sup> See, for example, AV VI.117.

<sup>281</sup> "When a man is born, whoever he may be [here there are no caste privileges], he is born at once with a debt toward the Gods, the sages, the ancestors and men." SB I.7.2.1. Cf. BU VI.2.1 and other texts in Panikkar (1977/XXV), pp. 557ff., §11.

<sup>282</sup> Cf. Gusdorf (1972), pp. 19–239.

<sup>283</sup> See Lk 18:9–14, the only Gospel that records the parable.

<sup>284</sup> This would be the traditional Christian definition of sin as an "aversio a Deo et conversio ad creaturas" [turning away from God and toward creatures].

<sup>285</sup> Cf. the common liturgical prayer of a bishop and martyr in the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church: "Infirmiorem nostram respice, omnipotens Deus: et, quia pondus propriae actionis gravat . . ." [Look graciously upon our infirmity, Almighty God; because the burden of our own actions weighs upon us heavily . . .]. The very being from which action is born is a *pondus*, a weight. He speaks not of evil actions but only of actions.

in that case no consciousness would be possible. It is a real deficiency, an ultimate *privatio* in meta-ontological and not only in moral terms.<sup>286</sup> And we are once more very close to Buddhism.

The positive way of saying the same thing would be stressing, as we have already done, the character of transitivity of the verb, of the experience of being, intended as *be-ing*. *Being through be-ing is*; it is something but still it is-not-yet-altogether-something. It is on its way not as toward an extrinsic goal to be reached but as the deepest dimension in the very entrails of being. Of this medieval Scholasticism was aware, as are the scholars who discuss it today.<sup>287</sup>

Without entering here into further disquisitions on apophatism, analyzing its manifestations down through the centuries<sup>288</sup> or highlighting its intercultural character,<sup>289</sup> we can nevertheless surely say this: in various degrees, and out of various philosophical and cultural matrices, apophatism has always sought in one way or another to do away with Divine qualifications, including that of being, in order to preserve God—if we may say so—from our own creatureliness.<sup>290</sup>

The morphological difference between apophatism and atheism consists in this, that atheism proclaims its incompatibility with any theistic, deistic, or pantheistic assertion, whereas apophatism is more tolerant and allows room for the most diverse affirmations concerning the Divine. It will only beg that these affirmations not be absolutized and converted into idols. Atheism takes its position on the cataphatic level and from there develops a destructive critique of all affirmations concerning God; apophatism seeks to reach a previous "station" or standpoint from which any affirmation or negation of God loses all absolute, definitive meaning—hence its recourse to nothingness,<sup>291</sup> the void, and similar negative expressions.<sup>292</sup>

<sup>286</sup> The etymology of *carere* (from which since the fifteenth century in the Romance languages derive the words that have to do with lack and scarcity) is instructive though questioned (for example, by A. Ernout and A. Meillet): it has been related to *castus, cassus, castigo*, implying "cut, cut out, lack (of something)." Cf., in Sanskrit, *śasati*, "he cuts" (from a possible Indo-European root *kes*, "to cut"; cf. A. Walde and J. B. Hoffman).

<sup>287</sup> See the deep considerations of Zubiri (1985): "This God must be a *supreme reality*, however not a *supreme entity*. . . . The foundation of being is reality. . . . God is not the subsistent being, neither the *supreme entity*, nor adorned with the attribute of infinitude. God is not a *divine entity*, it is *supreme reality*. . . . God is beyond being. God has no being, being is only of mundane things, which, to be real 'now,' 'are' in the world" (p. 131). See also p. 55 and *passim*.

<sup>288</sup> Cf. the famous *Dreifaltigkeitslied*: "Snick all mein ich in Gottes niht" [I plunge my whole I into the nothingness of God] (Porion [1954], p. 137).

<sup>289</sup> "Since being rests in nothingness / and that in being there is no being, / let fire descend in my soul / and consume all its being!" (Jalal al Din Rumi, *Divan-e Šams-e Tabrizi*, in Beaucercueil [1965], p. 98).

<sup>290</sup> See, for example, *De Deo abscondito*, that precious casket of all the splendors of late Scholasticism in the dawning Renaissance age (Nicholas of Cusa, *Opera omnia* IV.3–10).

<sup>291</sup> See a typical text: Meister Eckhart, *Predigt 37*, comments on the passage of Acts 9:8, in which Saul, arising after his fall from the horse and the apparition on the road to Damascus, when he opens his eyes, "nihil videbat" [saw nothing]: "Mich dünkt, dass dies Wördein vierfachen Sinn habe. Der eine Sinn ist dieser: Als er aufstand von der Erde, sah er mit offenen Augen nichts, und dieses Nichts war Gott denn als er Gott sah, das nennt er ein Nichts. Der zweite Sinn: Als er aufstand, da sah er nichts als Gott. Der dritte: in allen Dingen sah er nichts als Gott. Der vierte: Als er Gott sah, da sah er alle Dinge als ein Nichts" [It seems to me that this statement has a fourfold meaning. The first meaning is this: when he arose from the earth, he saw nothing with his eyes wide open, and this Nothing was God: for when he saw God, he called him a nothing. The second meaning: when he rose he saw nothing but God. The third: in all things he saw nothing but God. The fourth: when he saw God, he saw all things as a nothing]. See the same idea in *Predigt 53*.

<sup>292</sup> "The wise, reflecting in the depths of their own hearts, seek the original connection (*bandhu*)

### Radical Relativity

A third approach (or stage) in our attempt at the deontologization of God might be called *radical relativity*, or *total reciprocity*. The key notion here is that of the constitutive relationship of everything with everything else, which is very different from pure and simple *relativism*, which, in stating the impossibility of valid affirmation, denies its own quest for validation. Relativism is pessimistic, surrendering all possibility of arriving at any criteria of truth, including its own; *relativity*, on the other hand, in refusing to absolutize such criteria, recognizes them as legitimate. I prefer to use the term "relativity" rather than "relation" in order to emphasize that we are not dealing with a mere relational entity, but with a constitutive relativity of the Divine, applicable both to the *ad intra* and the *ad extra* reality of divinity. Finally, because we are dealing with a relativity of the whole of reality, I term it "radical."<sup>293</sup> Alternatively, the term "reciprocity" also seems adequate; indeed, this expression might have been more effective for conveying precisely what I intend to say, but "relativity" is a more familiar word, hence easier to use and understand. *Sarvati-sarvatmakam* ("All in relation with all"; all is epitome of all) is a concept constantly repeated by the Śivaism of Kashmir.<sup>294</sup>

The intent is not, however, to merely designate the fact, now accepted as evident, that the *notion* of God is relative to the various degrees of human awareness, or to the diverse existential situations in which man can find himself.

### God as Genitive Relationship Constitutive of Reality

What I am proposing is that applying relativity to God means considering Him not as Being, not as Substance, not as the more or less transcendent Absolute, but as a "genitive and generative" (if you allow me this expression) relationship. Radical relativity wants to highlight that God is the Genitive character of reality, the Reality of reality, the Truth of truth.<sup>295</sup> God is a reality so "real" that He cannot be thought as existing externally or independently from the things for which God is precisely God. God then genuinely appears as the most intimate part of things themselves, though not identifiable with any thing. In a word, God would be the constitutive genitive, truly "generative," of all things. Things are because they are *of* God, and God in turn is nothing else; whereas things are insofar as they are of God, God in turn is nothing else but this *of* of things.<sup>296</sup>

Going back in a way to the apophatic position, relativity or reciprocity shows us that God is not "being" because, ultimately, God is not a "thing," is not substance. He is pure relationship, and as such, not even God upholds Himself or stands by Himself. In the final analysis, God has no "selfness" since He "is" an *I*, a *Thou*, and a *He* that change place in the Trinitarian *Perichōrēsis*. God is not the "other"; but neither is God the "same": hence God cannot be in any way the object of human thinking or willing. No reifying thought, no intel-

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between being and non-being (*asat*)" RV X.129.4.

<sup>293</sup> We know the importance of the category of relationship in Christian Scholasticism, in respect to the Trinitarian and Christological issues; equally familiar is the awkwardness of the Scholastic effort to fit all that the Christian faith sought to express into the Aristotelian framework. For a modern discussion of the Thomist problem of relationship, see Krempel (1952). See more recently Gunton (1993).

<sup>294</sup> See Abhinavagupta (1988), pp. 42, 72, and *passim*.

<sup>295</sup> The BU II.1.20 tells us that the last Upaniṣad (doctrine, secret teaching) is precisely "the truth of the truth," *satyasya satyam*—a formulation also used by Sufism (*ḥaqīqa al-ḥaqīq*). Cf. Anawati and Gardet (1960), p. 293.

<sup>296</sup> See Zubiri (1985), p. 87: "There is no reality outside of real things. . . . Reality is 'more' than the things that are real, however this 'more' is in the very things."

lectual activity will ever succeed in deciphering the mystery of this *of* relationships. As a fact, such *of* is ineffable, since the relationship of relationships cannot be explained apart from the relationships themselves, and yet this *of* is constitutive while, at the same time, remaining apart from them all. Once again we return to silence.

Let us note, however, that there are two categories of silence: a silence that may be defined as departure and another that may be an arrival. Silence as departure is a religious silence through which and in which men perceive God. The silence of arrival is a silence reached after a long process of drawing near to the reality of realities when the *logos* has learned to discard all things superfluous. It is a silence reached after a long discourse when the moment has come to enter *once more* into silence. Therefore, the ultimate challenge of philosophy (call it, if you prefer, theology) consists in stripping the invisible "body" of God of His "coat of many colors." All is analogy, approximation, symbol.

### Pure Relationality

The pitfalls for the labors of reason in this area lie in substantive thinking. When we think about relationships, it is difficult not to think about them substantively: that is, we think of "things" relating to one another. Our attention is drawn precisely to the substantiality of the things that enter into the relationship. But this does not mean we are thinking about "relationality" itself. If by mental effort we eliminate the substances at play in a relationship, "pure relationality" remains, nothing but a mere constitutive reference between two things. Nevertheless, things continue to be regarded not as relationships in themselves but as the foundation of relationship. Let us consider then what would happen to our relationship if both its terms were not only bracketed but really did not exist outside of that given relationship—that is, if they were not to be considered as independent entities at all. Our relationship would then appear to be converted into a mere formal concept, without consistency of any kind, since the relationship now no longer depends on "things" but the "things" depend on the relationship.<sup>297</sup>

Let us take one more step: let us not think about the relationship as a thing (open, so to speak, on both sides). Let us not think about it as one (thing), neither as two (its extremes), but let us try to be conscious of its original a-duality. To think reflexively about this may not be an immediate option, but it is not impossible for human consciousness once it has overcome the duality subject/object, or, rather, once the a-duality subject/object of innocent thinking has been transformed into the a-duality of pure relationship.

As an example, let us consider the relationship of motherhood. What would remain of this relationship if its terms were not simply bracketed, but totally eliminated? In such case, the relationship would not lose but rather acquire its full significance. A relationship is not "something" that depends on "other" things previously given or existing, but it is what constitutes them as such. The experience of motherhood is not born when a mother sees her child in front of her (her child thing) or when she acknowledges herself as a mother (besides many other things), but when she "forgets" both about herself and about her child (whether he will be healthy, happy, etc.) and she simply becomes aware of motherhood. Let us recall the Buddhist intuition that things themselves are but simple relationships, nothing more.

<sup>297</sup> "Nulla relatio est substantia secundum rem in creaturis" [No relation is a substance *secundum rem* (in concrete reality) in creatures] (Aquinas, *In Sententiarum* I, d.4, q.1, a.1, ad 3). Yet substance can itself be relative, even in Thomism; see the Trinitarian doctrine of subsistent relations. See *Summa Theologiae* I, q.28, a.2.

Now we will try to approach the issue from another standpoint. Until now, generally, substance was considered the foundation of relationship, so much so that relationship was thought of as a relationship between things. In our case the situation is reversed: rather than seeing things as foundations of relationships, we discover that things exist only in virtue of relationships. In the example above, there is no mother as a foundation of maternity, but rather motherhood making the mother possible and filiation making the son possible. Furthermore, there is neither mother nor son independently of motherhood and filiation. And, strictly speaking, this applies to any thing. In short, there are not "substances" first, which later enter into a relationship with one another; but what we call "things" are only simple relationships.<sup>298</sup>

Substance itself is unthinkable if deprived of the idea of relationship. *Substantia* is what is considered upholding, as it were, the whole of a thing's qualifications—that is, substance is such only in relation to what it upholds (or to what underlies it).<sup>299</sup>

So-called substance of Aristotelian terminology would be nothing but a crystallized relationship, a relationship whose umbilical cord had been severed to make it appear independent. In actual fact, such a "substance" would already be dead. One cannot strictly say that relationship is the foundation of things. This would mean that we were still back in the substantialistic schema, since from our perspective there are not "things" that "rest" on relationship so that they may subsist; this would be to convert relationship into substance, and our viewpoint would have contributed nothing but a switch in terminology. No; things, as we have said, are but simple relationships. The mother of our example *is* inasmuch as she is mother. But a word of caution: no bi-univocal relationship exhausts a relational entity; relationship is always polyvalent, always polyhedral. The mother in our example is also offspring, friend, wife, colleague, citizen, and so on. She is nothing other than radical relativity: *in se* she is nothing. Not only is she a citizen in relation to a *civitas*, a creature in relation to the Creator, but her very character, complexion, intelligence, will, and all that is are actually nothing but relationships distinguishing this person from other similar sets of attributes. Not one of these attributes possesses a sense "in itself": individuals are more or less intelligent in relation to the things they understand; they are of a particular structure only vis-à-vis that of others. The body itself is a complex of relationships. We cannot think only of the word "mother," therefore, because a "mother" alone does not exist: she is also many other things. We crystallize this set of relationships in the substance of "mother," which is also all the rest. The substantialization of "mother" derives from the manner of our conceptualization. The true mother is pure relationship.

This "relational" polyvalence is important in order to understand this third aspect of the divine deontologization. If relationships were solely bi-univocal and constitutive, they would always suffocate, so to speak, any other entity that could not survive without extrinsic relationships with the rest of the world. We would be close to Plotinus's "meeting of the one with the one" or at least to that theological individualism that has been the plague of many forms of spirituality, Christianity included. Were the reality of the mother in our example to be exhausted in this relationship it could not have existed before this function, since her being would then consist exclusively in her motherhood. The same would hold true for God, who would have had to create all things at the same time, since He could not have existed

<sup>298</sup> Consider the etymology of "cosa," "chose": they derive from *causa*, with its reference to utterance. See, for the general issue, Heidegger (1975).

<sup>299</sup> The Sanskrit word usually translated with "substance" is *dravya* (thing, matter, possession, riches, goods, what is held), which derives from *daru* ("matter" in all acceptations), related to *dhruva* (firm, stable).

before me and yet had to exist before me in order to create other entities preceding me in time.<sup>300</sup> This very issue was a concern of Christian speculation.<sup>301</sup> The problem applies not only to creation<sup>302</sup> but also to the Trinity.<sup>303</sup>

*Radical* relativity tells us that things can be constituted as mutual relationship only if an ever deeper relationality allows the transcending of duality. Relativity is radical, and no bi-univocal relationship is sufficient to exhaust it; it is not sufficient, in other words, to explain any being. Simply looking at the world, we can see that relationships are not only polyhedric, but radical, to the point that no "being" is fully explained by a limited number of relationships: he always remains an "open space" beyond any duality. Radical relativity is the constitutive openness of the whole universe in all its relationships.

*Radical* relativity explains how there can be an atheism that denies God as separate Substance, as Supreme Being, as the projection of unsatisfied human desires. It also explains the claims of apophaticism: the total ineffability of the absolute and hence the negation of all non-being, since any human affirmation is a negation and a limitation, rather than a positive positing of anything.

In this third conception *God is not* (as things are, and we have no other criterion at hand), and yet *neither He is nothing*, seeing that the negation of being is vulnerable to the same criticism as its affirmation: affirming or denying God's non-being belongs necessarily to the sphere of our thought and, as such, cannot touch God either positively or negatively.

Radical relativity is not therefore in opposition either with atheism nor with apophaticism. Likewise, the attitude of radical relativity will accept the three positive positions that we have

<sup>300</sup> This is the Buddhist criticism of creationist systems. Cf. Glasenapp (1954, p. 426), who quotes the relevant sources.

<sup>301</sup> Cf. Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram* V.7 (PL 34:328); VI.6 and 10 (PL 34:342–43 and 346), etc.

<sup>302</sup> Cf. the form used by Meister Eckhart to solve the double difficulty already faced by St. Augustine and St. Thomas, among others, of a divine creation declined in time: "Secundo notandum quod Deus simul creavit caelum et terram et omnia quae in eis sunt 'in statu suo et in pulchritudine sua,' 'in specie perfecta et forma et in electione accidentium' [Maimonide] sed non simul apparuerunt. Exemplum de agricola seminante simul diversa genera serninum in terram. Pars autem oritur post unum diem, alia vero pars post duos dies, alia vero post tres dies, sed omnia semina proiecta fuerunt in una hora" [Maimonide; In second place it must be noticed that *God* created at the same time *heaven and earth* and all that is in them, "in its own state and beauty, in its own perfect species, in the form and election of its accidents" that, however, did not appear at the same time. Example: (think about) the farmer that sows different kinds of seeds. Some of them will germinate the first day, some the second, and some the third, however all seeds were sown in one hour]" (Eckhart, *Expositio Libri Genesis* I.1 [LW, p. 1:200, §18]).

<sup>303</sup> Cf. how Eckhart, following in this Thomas Aquinas, puts the question: "Simul enim et semel quo deus fuit, quo filium sibi coaeternum per omnia coaequalem deum genuit, etiam mundum creavit [cf. Augustine, *Confessions* X.20n29], Job 33:14]: 'semel loquitur deus.' Loquitur autem filium generando, quia filius est verbum; loquitur et creaturas creando, Psalmus [32:9] 'Dixit et facta sunt, mandavit et creata sunt.' Hinc est quod in alio Psalmo dicitur: 'semel locutus est deus, duo haec audiui.' 'Duo,' scilicet caelum et terram, vel potius 'duo haec,' personarum scilicet emanationem et mundi creationem, quae tamen 'semel ipse loquitur,' 'semel locutus est' [at the same time and with an only action by which God was and by which He generated (His) co-eternal and in all equal Son, He also created the world. God speaks "but once" says Job. He speaks, in fact, generating the Son, since the Son is (his) Word, but He also speaks creating the creatures. Therefore, the Psalm says, "He spoke and they (the creatures) were fashioned, He ordered and they were created." And another psalm: "God has spoken once, twice I have heard it spoken." "Twice" that is *Heaven and Earth*, in other words "these two," that is the emanation of persons and the creation of the world. And nevertheless "He speaks but once" once only He spoke] (Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Libri Genesis* I.1 [LW, pp. 1:190–91, §7]).

described in relation to God as Being: it will understand anthropomorphism, ontomorphism, and personalism as so many basic human attitudes adopted in order to express the mystery of the "ultimate," or whatever the latter may be termed. On the other hand, it will not allow either a substantialization of God that would totally separate Him from the world, or an absolutization of the Divine that would likewise render Divinity extraneous to the things of which it claims precisely to be God.

Xavier Zubiri has introduced the notion of respectivity that in some ways represents a homeomorphic equivalent of what we are saying. The distinction he makes between relationship and respectivity<sup>304</sup> is very important. According to Zubiri, respectivity "determines the very constitution of the subjects of relationship in their mutual connection; respectivity precedes relationship."<sup>305</sup> Such respectivity in the order of reality is what Zubiri calls "world."<sup>306</sup>

We shall not engage now in further elaborations that would require further distinctions. The purpose here is merely to highlight an important family resemblance deserving a more in-depth study.

If I do not adopt *in toto* the Zubirian terminology, it is because I would rather not mix two cosmologies without further clarifications. For Zubiri, respectivity refers to the world. According to the Buddhist vision, which is what I am attempting to comment on, respectivity would also include the Divine. Even though I feel this difference is not incompatible with much of what Zubiri says, I consider it worth mentioning.

### Contingency

The fundamental intuition of radical relativity begins with the experience of the divine radicality in its quality as the most profound possible human experience. As we have already seen, this experience and intuition were the origin and culmination of the Buddha's enlightenment. Let us now attempt to describe it beginning from another experience that has been the object of a great deal of study, and which is traditionally regarded in the West as the beginning of every spiritual journey. We are accustomed to hearing that the experience of human contingency—that is, the lived experience (*vivencia*) of man's "self-insufficiency," of his self-inconsistency, and of the consequent need to lean on an "other" in order to subsist—is the beginning of wisdom, humility, and philosophy. However scant our information may be on these spaces of human introspection or mystical experience, two important observations may come to mind.

The *first* is that this experience is not positive, but merely negative. Nothing is experienced but a void, the lack of the most coveted thing of all: being, the foundation, the subject. The experience of contingency appears as the experience of a great disappointment. What one (secretly?) hoped to be is not. Genuine being slips through our fingers. We do not contain the "reason" of our existence, we do not uphold ourselves, and so forth.

The *second* observation exhorts us to realize how groundless it has been to presuppose a psychological or individual ego (we need not go into further distinctions) that we considered strong enough and well enough equipped to bring to fruition the ultimate human experience. Thus, when it is observed that this kind of ego does not possess the solidity that we have always attributed to it, the experience of contingency takes the form

<sup>304</sup> This intrinsic and formal moment of the constitution of something real, owing to which this same thing is "function" of the others, is what can be called "respectivity" (Zubiri [1962], p. 427).

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> "World is not the mere totality of real things (this is also true of the kosmos) but rather the totality of real things owing to their character of reality, that is, inasmuch as they are real: respectivity as a mode or character of reality" (ibid.).

of a negative, pessimistic, alienating experience, and becomes the springboard for a leap into the arms of the "other."

The very etymology of the word "contingency" can shed light on the concept. It is derived from the Latin *cum-tangere*—to have contact, to touch one another. The contingent, then, is that which is contiguous to the Other. Such contingency may mean leaning on the Other, accentuating unilateral dependence: verticality and transcendence. The point of contact, according to another interpretation, is what strengthens both. If I touch him, he also touches me: contiguity is mutual, we are both immanent to each other (pantheism). A third interpretation says that the bi-univocal relationship is paritarian and, therefore, we are all on the same level with no privileges, so to speak, for the one who is touched (atheism). Whoever I may touch is simply equal to me or a projection of myself. A fourth interpretation is not content with well-defined and horizontal bi-univocal relationships. It will uphold that the contact, the contingency regards the whole of reality: everything is directly or indirectly contiguous to everything; there is a sort of universal solidarity, and it is indeed so because no contact is sufficient, since the chain of contacts (in time and space) shows us that there is no first ring but they are all contingent. Therefore, it is necessary to leave the whole chain behind (Buddhism).

I am describing the experience of radical relativity related to contingency because, despite its negative axiological mode, it is ultimately the same experience as radical relativity, although differently expressed. When man experiences his own contingency in a positive form, what he experiences is not a mere privation, the intrinsic absence of a reason for existence—all this is mere lack—but what he experiences, in that very point of contact that is his own, belongs to a transcendence that does not completely leave behind his psychological ego. For this reason, I choose to refer to this experience as an intuition of the *radical relativity* of man, for it discloses both the *relativity* of "being" and its *divine radicality*.

In other words, when we "listen" deeply, we easily discover what we have called "negative contingency,"<sup>307</sup> that is, that the "I" to which we attribute all our acts does not possess sufficient consistency to be the ultimate foundation of these acts, inasmuch as now that same "I" appears fleeting, transient, and as fragile as everything that rests upon it.<sup>308</sup>

This is not all, however. Now man discovers that his very ego opens up to an I that is not himself but an *I*, a true I, for whom his own "ego" is nothing but a thou.<sup>309</sup> This intuition could be expressed by taking the Spanish expression "Yo soy tu-yo" (I am yours) as the formulation of what we are trying to express.<sup>309</sup> I will not stray here, however; I seek only to describe what appears to me to be relevant to the matter at hand.

To express myself in the simplest possible words: we discover that in our innermost core there is a "depth" that "is" what we fundamentally are and, at the same time, is identical to what the "other" man can likewise experience; such depth constitutes what is deepest in every human being, as anyone who has had this experience can attest. This same depth is lived, perceived, intuited as the unique source of all things, and yet never exhausted in any of them, so to speak, because it is a bottomless ground. Not only *Abgrund* but also *Ungrund*. But this might be saying too much.

<sup>307</sup> "So bin ich ewig; denn ich bin" [Thus I am eternal; for I am], says Goethe in his *Prometheus*, expressing the same intuition. In parallel fashion, the Buddha will say, "'I' am not, for I am not eternal. If I were at all, I would be eternal. Whoever can live, for one moment, the 'I am,' is already outside time and outside contingency."

<sup>308</sup> "Quid enim tam tuum quam tu? / et quid tam non tuum quam tu. / si alicuius est, quod es?" [For what is so much "yours" as yourself? / and what is so much "not yours" as yourself, / if what you are belongs to someone else?] (Augustine, *Tractatus in Ioannis Evangelium* 29.3). Cf. Panikkar (1986/10).

<sup>309</sup> See BG X.9.4–5, and, naturally, *tat tvam asi* [thou art that] (CU VI.8.7).



We could have called this section "The Radical Contingency," summing up the Buddha's fundamental intuition. This contingency includes the *contingency of truth*. The Buddha's innovation represents today a mutation in Western culture: there are no *veritates aeternae*: separate intellects. Through the denial of the existence of such eternal truths, one can perceive the true Buddhist "revolution"—which not all Buddhist schools have followed. We are talking of the *forma mentis*, of the different structure of dominant thinking that, as we have mentioned, continues to be monotheistic and rationalistic. When the Buddha talks of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), he does not outrule mental activity, which must, however, be pure, empty, free, so that thinking may flow freely.

A world of necessity to which even the monotheistic God should submit (as St. Thomas very aptly argued and, with him, much of the West) does not exist. However, even in Scholasticism some voices of dissent were heard, such as, for example, St. Peter Damian, who bravely upheld that the Author of all things might well escape the need to submit to logical necessity.

Such attitude does not lead either to anarchy or chaos, but expresses another mentality that does not eliminate thinking but requires a pure, empty mind. . . .

### Divine Radicality

We have called this experience "intuition of divine radicality," because through it we discover an ultimate source in the core of our being, as the most authentic and deep root of what we ourselves "are." Such radicality transcends the mere individual, and even the merely human personality, as it touches a root, a ground that cannot be defined either common or unique, since equivalence and difference are comparative terms. Such experience can take multiple forms, but basically it is an experience of ultimate and constitutive relativity of all beings: there "is" an ultimate "thing," both immanent and transcendent, that is what we really "are." This "thing" is not different from me, since it is my deepest I, and nevertheless I cannot truly claim it "is" the ego that I feel I own and am responsible for. This "thing" does not exist separately from me; neither is it a sort of common denominator in which all beings take part. It is, rather, the most intimate and personal "core" (for want of a better definition): the more "I am," the closer I am to this divine root.<sup>310</sup>

In referring to this radicality we have used the adjective "divine" for two reasons. First of all, since it transcends mere individuality, it is not to be confused with the individual and it can be (generally and specifically) applied to any individual. Phenomenologically, therefore, the appellation "divine" would appear to be suitable. Second, this "something" is what the most heterogeneous traditions of humanity have regarded as ultimate and definitive, and is what in the common terminology of many languages is customarily called God.

Translating this fundamental intuition into yet different expressions, we might venture

<sup>310</sup> Cf. the Upaniṣadic *aḥam brahmā asmi*, BU I.4.10, and the expression in CU III.14.3: "This my *ātman* is within my heart, smaller than a grain of rice, oat, mustard, millet, or the germ of the millet seed; this is my *ātman* within the heart, greater than the atmosphere, the heavens and the world." Cf. also the traditional Christian statements: "Interior intimo meo et superior summo meo" [more intimate (to myself) than what (in me) is intimate and higher than what is highest] (Augustine, *Confessions* III.6); "Interior est omni re, quia in Ipso sunt omnia; exterior est omni re, quia ipse est super omnia" [Inner than anything for all things are in Him, more external than anything for He is above all things] (*De spiritu et anima* 14 [PL 40:791]). "Ipse Deus est propria et immediata causa uniuscuiusque rei, et quodammodo magis intimum quam sibi, ut Agustinus dicit" [God Himself is the immediate and proper cause of all things, and in a certain manner, more intimate to all things than things themselves] (Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* q.18, a.16, ad 12; and also *De anima*, a.12, ad 1; *Summa theologiae* I, q.77, a.8, ad 1).

to describe the Divine as that unique radicality inherent in all beings by which every being is what it is, in its unique relationship with the other beings. We can neither say that such radicality, in itself, *is* (since, after all, we are not talking about beings), nor that it *is not*, since it is at the very root of each being. This radicality is the only dimension of the Divine of which one can speak, and it consists in a pure relativity. We are not dealing with a Being that "dwells," as a more or less welcome guest or stranger, in the furthest depths of each being. (This would already imply what is meant to be discussed: implying that each being is an individual, and that God is the "Other" who sustains it.) On the contrary, the discovery in question is that every entity is what it is precisely because it manifests an intimate and constitutive relationship with other entities so that we find at the bottom a radical unity that does not render things uniform, but, on the contrary, allows them to be unique. Unity is primary. Such unity, immanent to each thing, is at the same time transcendent, inasmuch as nothing really exhausts it, nor indeed all things together. Universal unity is not merely a sum of things.

Perhaps it will be of some help, in order to grasp what is being said here, to visualize the indispensable reversal of the typically rational outlook that is culturally characteristic of the West. By the Western outlook I mean the dynamic perspective, as distinguished from what might be called not simply static, but "unitary." Dynamism begins with multiplicity and feels propelled toward an end, a goal, that is supposed to be more perfect than the point of departure. The dynamic vision represents the ascending path of things toward their goal: God would be the goal reached by the world asymptotically in the infinite (whether this "God" is seen as Being, Power, Person, Future, Social Perfection, or what have you). The path is conquest, and the means is progress.

The other mentality, the unitary view, is precisely the opposite. Here the path is reclaiming—redemption, if you will—and the means is returning to the source. Unity is primary, and multiplicity is derived. God is the origin rather than the end, and things come from the Divine rather than proceed toward it. The path of return is genuinely a regression; hence, perfection consists not in filling oneself with being, in managing to become that which one is-not (yet), but in emptying oneself of being, in ceasing to be what one (still) is.

There is still more. The very vision of the world can be considered from the point of view of multiplicity, and then we have a multitude of "things" that will necessarily be considered substances—that is, centers of operations, with laws regulating them, and centrifugal and centripetal tendencies constituting them, seeing that the real is the individual, the concrete. Or else one adopts the opposite view, according to which the real is constituted by the universal, by totality (to use the terminology of the first outlook), and it is the world in its entirety that shows true consistency. Individuals are then seen simply as separate, detached parts, being nothing but mere relationships of a whole. If addition and multiplication represent the mental operations of the first position, subtraction and division characterize the cognitive form of the second.<sup>311</sup>

#### *Trinitarian Perichoresis*

Were I to attempt to express in Christian terms what I have sought to describe in a more or less phenomenological manner, it would come down to this: the authentic Christic concept of the Divinity (without ignoring its enormous—and positive—debt both to the Judaic conception of YHWH and to Greek speculation upon being) contains intrinsic possibilities that have not yet been suitably exploited.

Christianity's key idea is undoubtedly the dogma of the Trinity, which, for our present

<sup>311</sup> See, by way of introduction to the issue, Nakamura (1971).

purposes, I shall distinguish from the various theological interpretations of which it has been made the object.<sup>312</sup> The very notion of the Trinity ought to suffice to banish any substantialistic interpretation of the Divinity, for such an interpretation would be tantamount to tritheism (precisely Islam's accusation for Christianity). If the Father is Being, the Son Being, and the Holy Spirit Being, then either there are three Beings and so three Gods—tritheism—or else the one God is a single, absolute Being, of which Father, Son, and Spirit are but different perspectives—and this would be the contrary heresy of modalism. Indeed, the most traditional Trinitarian theology will tell us that the "divine persons" are only subsistent (not substantial) relationships, that is, entirely relative to the others, in such a way that each reciprocally implies and embraces the other two without actually *being* them. The two key concepts elaborated so patiently and steadfastly by Christian orthodoxy over the course of the first Christian centuries regard "nature" and "person" and were developed precisely to avoid sliding into either of the two extremes cited above—tritheism and modalism. Trinity is radical relativity *par excellence*.

A second point, equally traditional in Christian theology, is a corollary of the divine simplicity that leads us to considering the act by which the Father "generates" the Son as the same act by which He both "creates" all creatures<sup>313</sup> and knows Himself.<sup>314</sup> Now, in the light of what we have been saying, we can assert that God's radical relativity *ad intra* mirrors the same radicality *ad extra*.<sup>315</sup> In other words, the whole universe, as image or vestige of the Trinity, is endowed with this same Trinitarian character of radical relativity. Things "are" in the measure that they cease to be in order to give themselves to other things. Things are but reciprocal constitutive relationships. There are no windowless monads. Radical relativity is not only vertical but also horizontal. To borrow yet another expression from the purest Christian terminology: the intra-trinitarian *circumincessio* corresponds to an extra-trinitarian *Perichôresis*.<sup>316</sup>

<sup>312</sup> See, as a simple introduction, Kretschmar (1956), and especially the extensive bibliography by Schadel (1984–1988). See more recently *Iglesia viva* 27 (1993): 167.

<sup>313</sup> "Quia una actione generat filium qui est heres, lux de luce, et creat creaturam quae est tenebra, creata, facta, non filius" [Because with one action, he generates the Son who is heir, light of light, and creates the creature who is darkness, created, made, not the Son] (Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Sancti Evangelii Secundum Iohannem* (LW, p. 3:61, §73). See above, the texts quoted.

<sup>314</sup> "Praeterea . . . sicut iure dicitur Pater intelligere et dicere se et creaturas Verbo, ita Pater et Filius diligere se et creaturas Spiritu Sancto" [Moreover . . . as the Father is rightly said to know and utter himself and creatures with the Word, so the Father and the Son are rightly said to love one another and creatures in the Holy Spirit] (Parente [1938], p. 293). Compare also Thomas Aquinas. "Deus enim cognoscendo se, cognoscit omnem creaturam. Verbum igitur, in mente conceptum, est representativum omnis eius quod actu intellegitur. . . . Sed quia Deus uno actu et se et omnia intellegit, unicum Verbum eius est expressivum non solum Patris, sed etiam creaturarum" [For God, knowing himself, knows every creature. Therefore the Word conceived in the mind is representative of everything that is in acts, understood. . . . But because God knows himself and all things in one act, his one Word is expressive not only of the Father, but also of all creatures] (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 34, a. 3. See also *ibid.*, q. 37, a. 2). Obviously, neither Thomas's position, nor the one I maintain in the present work, can be confused with any kind of pantheism. See also the liturgical expression, "Ante me non est formatus Deus, et post me non erit" [Before me, God was not formed, and after me, God will not be] (*Magnificat Antiphon*, dom. II. Advent [Catholic Rite], referred to Christ).

<sup>315</sup> See, as an isolated reference, Kaliba (1952).

<sup>316</sup> See the notion of radical trinity complementary to the so-called immanent and economic trinities in Panikkar (1993/XXXIII), etc.

## Epextasis

The New Testament contains a *hapax legomenon* expressing the tension that typifies Christians pushing themselves with a physical effort, as in an athletic contest, toward something lying ahead and beyond. I refer to St. Paul's autobiographical comment,

Forgetting those things that are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are ahead.<sup>317</sup>

In other words, I let go of everything that in any way weighs me down: every possession, all spiritual or even ontological accumulation—in short, all that I am, and I strive, I stretch, I lean toward something ever before me, ever beyond, something ever unreachable and unseizable not only in this world but in the definitive life as well, because the ultimate nature of reality is neither static nor dynamic, but epestatic: that is, pure tension, simple transcendence, moving further on, not in the sense of rectilinear change, not even of a circular process, but in a kind of spiral progression, constantly renewed, ever new and original, since the very universe of being is in a process of expansion. The vision of God, then, consists in "seeing" God precisely as invisible,<sup>318</sup> and His existence rests upon having none.<sup>319</sup> Just as we ourselves are not yet being (as a certain metaphysical conception would have it) and approach being asymptotically, so God, on the other side of the boundary of Being, withdraws from it indefinitely. Being is merely a limit concept, for the creature as for the Creator, although in opposite ways—whereas the former stands short of that limit, the latter lies beyond. Being is a mental catalyst allowing us to deal with the incommensurable and even to speak of the ineffable. Once we have used it as a category of thought, as a "pretext" for intelligibility, however, it must be discarded; otherwise, excluded from the vital process of intellection, it will congeal, and thereby become the greatest hindrance against what it was supposed to accomplish. This would be the intellectual formulation of the Buddha's example of the raft that is to be left behind once the river is crossed. It is the same similitude as the scaffolds used by other traditions.

The preceding paragraph, in which we have tried to approach the Buddhist position from another context, draws its inspiration from Gregory of Nyssa, author of the concept of *epextasis*.<sup>320</sup> Although Gregory was extremely parsimonious with the use of the substantive<sup>321</sup> (something a Buddhist will readily comprehend), the verbal expressions of this suggestive term<sup>322</sup> frame one of the central motifs of the mystical conception of the Cappadocian mystic.<sup>323</sup>

<sup>317</sup> "Ad ea vero, quae sunt priora, extendens me ipsum" (Phil 3:13); "Straining forward," "strecke mich nach," "tendu de tout mon être."

<sup>318</sup> Cf. Heb 11:27.

<sup>319</sup> According to Evagrius—whose mysticism, according to Balthasar (1939), pp. 31–47, is more akin to Buddhism than to Christianity—God grants the beatific vision by denying it. See also Nicolas (1966).

<sup>320</sup> See the synthesis by Jean Daniélou (1944), pp. 315–26, to whom we owe the introduction of this concept into today's academic disciplines.

<sup>321</sup> Indeed, Gregory of Nyssa uses the word in a mystical sense only once.

<sup>322</sup> Composed of ἐπι, which implies possession, and the divine immanence, ἐκ, which suggests emergence from oneself, and transcendence, and the verbal root ὄντα-, which means precisely "to be here."

<sup>323</sup> Balthasar (1942); Völker (1955).

Most significantly, however, it has scarcely ever been used outside scholarly circles,<sup>324</sup> as witnessed by the oblivion into which it has fallen.<sup>325</sup>

The importance of this concept—unlike that of “ecstasy,” which is still a technical term in Gregory of Nyssa<sup>326</sup>—seems to me to reside in its implicit synthesis between the ecstatic, substantialistic vision of reality and a dynamic, temporal conception of the same. *Epextasis* would seem to lie midway between mere substantiality and simple functionality. He calls this middle path “paradoxical par excellence” (τὸ παραδοξότατον).<sup>327</sup> *Epextasis* means progress, something more than simple change or movement;<sup>328</sup> yet at the same time it not only expresses a characteristic of our manner of knowing,<sup>329</sup> but seems to me to proceed much further, aiming at a characteristic of ultimate reality itself. And here Buddhism can add its contribution. Let us look at some examples.

True cognition . . . and true vision consist in seeing that [God] is invisible.<sup>330</sup>

After all, strictly speaking, there is nothing to see.<sup>331</sup>

That which it is necessary to know of God consists in knowing that to know is nothing other than to discover that nothing of what the human mind can know of God is knowledge of God.<sup>332</sup>

Therefore also,

the divine voice grants what is asked of it through that which precisely it does not grant.<sup>333</sup>

<sup>324</sup> The simple mention of the word, without any exploration of the possibilities of the concept in comparative spirituality, is found in a work that I have cited: Le Saux (1965), pp. 239, 245.

<sup>325</sup> None of the more commonly used theological or biblical dictionaries, as far as I have found, list this word.

<sup>326</sup> See the evidence for this in Völker (1955), pp. 202ff.

<sup>327</sup> See a passage from *De Vita Moysis*: “Oh Moses! Since you have such desire to rush ahead (ἐπεκτεινόμενος τοῖς ἔμπροσθε) [an evident reference to Phil 3:13], and since your racing has never known weariness, you should know that in me [God, the speaker] there is a space so great that were you to cross it, you would never reach its end. But in another way, this way is stability (στάσις). Indeed, I shall establish you on the rock. This is the most paradoxical thing (τὸ παραδοξότατον)—that stability and movement (κίνησις) would be the same thing. After all, ordinarily one advancing does not stand still, and one standing still does not advance. And yet the one who advances, by that very fact stands still” (PG 44:405).

<sup>328</sup> See Daniélou (1944), p. 234.

<sup>329</sup> This would be the minimalist interpretation of certain Patristic manuals. It seems to me, however, that many of the Fathers were on a line much closer to Buddhism than is commonly imagined.

<sup>330</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis* (PG 44:376).

<sup>331</sup> “Est ergo interminabilis divina natura et interminabile comprehendi non potest” [The divine nature, then, is endless, and what is endless cannot be comprehended] (ibid.; PG 44:401).

<sup>332</sup> Ibid. (PG 44:376). The Migne Latin translation reads, “Quid oporteat de Deo cognoscere, quod quidem cognoscere nihil aliud est, quam nihil eorum esse Deum cognoscere, quae humana mens potest cognoscere.” The Greek word is always (γινώσκειν).

<sup>333</sup> Ibid. (PG 44:404).

Epextasis is not only precisely the human condition,<sup>334</sup> but also the symbol of the very structure of ultimate reality: it will suffice to adopt this attitude of continuous tension (attention) ever moving on, ever transcending ourselves; not, however, in virtue of a simple dynamism toward some distant target, existent but unreachable, but in a constitutive attention "advancing by virtue of one's very immobility."<sup>335</sup> For the end, God, the ultimate, is precisely the abyss that never ceases its motion, proceeding

from beginning to beginning, or still better, from principle to principle (*ἀρχὴ ἐξ ἀρχῆς*)—through principles (beginnings) without end.<sup>336</sup>

The principle, the foundation, the (*ἀρχή*),<sup>337</sup> the *agra*,<sup>338</sup> consists in beginning ever anew, in being constant beginning,<sup>339</sup> in leaving nothing behind—so that a new beginning may take place—in being an incessant point of departure, with no self-sustainance, never turning back,<sup>340</sup> not amassing riches of any kind,<sup>341</sup> not even ontic, absolute ontological poverty—it is to the spirit itself that it was enjoined to be poor<sup>342</sup>—and *being* only in the measure that it advances, continues, lives, "flees from nowhere to no destiny," in a "stationary flight."<sup>343</sup> The divine transcendence is a divine transcendence of Being. "If you think that you know—you do not yet know,"<sup>344</sup> Christian Scripture says, echoing a wisdom not only Socratic but also Eastern.<sup>345</sup> Gregory, moreover, explains<sup>346</sup> why "finding God consists in endlessly seeking God":<sup>347</sup>

Contemplation of God's face consists in journeying toward God ceaselessly, in moving forward constantly, endlessly, seeking the Word.<sup>348</sup>

Only on the journey, only in the search, is God to be found. Indeed, the expression "finding God" is a term that may disorientate. It leads us to entertain the idea that God can be "found," so as to be seized and possessed, like any other object—whereas God is nothing other than the abyss that is beyond being, and hence beyond any possibility, even theoretical, of comprehension;<sup>349</sup> and the journey is simply allowing your own bulk and dross to fall away.<sup>350</sup> Hence Gregory

<sup>334</sup> See Daniélou (1944), p. 318.

<sup>335</sup> See the profound reflections of Balthasar's commentary (1942), p. 67.

<sup>336</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis* (PG 44:941).

<sup>337</sup> It is found in Gen 1:1 and Jn 1:1.

<sup>338</sup> RV X.129.3; SB VI.1.1.1, etc.

<sup>339</sup> See Eliade (1949).

<sup>340</sup> Cf. Lk 9:62.

<sup>341</sup> Cf. Mt 6:19.

<sup>342</sup> Cf. Mt 5:3.

<sup>343</sup> The expression is from Gregory of Nyssa and is used in Barsotti's work (1957).

<sup>344</sup> See such texts as Gal 4:9; 1 Cor 8:2, 3; 13:12.

<sup>345</sup> See, e.g., KenU II.3; Tao-te-Ching II.

<sup>346</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis* (PG 44:1).

<sup>347</sup> Ibid. (PG 46:97), and many other passages cited by Daniélou (1944), pp. 320–21.

<sup>348</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, (PG 44:1025).

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> See the Buddhist intuition that would have the "apparent movement" of the mystic depend on their gradual quenching of his thirst, attachment, desire.

does not have any scruples in saying that any representation of the divine, of whatever order, is nothing more than an "idol" of God.<sup>351</sup>

This underlying relativist and apophatic theme has continued uninterrupted up to the present day.<sup>352</sup>

Another example is the Protestant doctor Johannes Scheffler, who converted to Catholicism, taking the confirmation name of Angelus Silesius.<sup>353</sup>

To avoid digressions we will only quote without comment some verses from his most famous work:<sup>354</sup>

*Die zarte Gottheit ist ein Nichts und Übernichts:  
Wer nichts in allem sieht, Mensch, glaube, dieser sieht's.*  
[Fragile Divinity is a Nothing and a Supernothing:  
whosoever nothingness in all things sees, man, believe him, that one sees]. (I.111)

*Gott ist so über all's, dass man nicht sprechen kann,  
Drum betest du ihn auch mit Schweigen besser an.*  
[God is so above all, that He can't be spoken:  
with silence, then, it is better to give Him token.] (I.240)

*Schweig, Allerliebster, schweig: kannst du nur gänzlich schweigen,  
So wird dir Gott mehr Guts, als du begehrts, erzeigen.*  
[Be still, beloved, be still; hold your peace fully  
God will grant you more than you can wish.] (II.8)

*Mensch, so du willst das Sein der Ewigkeit aussprechen,  
So must du dich zuvor des Redens ganz entbrechen.*  
[Man, if you wish to speak the Being of Eternity,  
All your vain babbling you had better quit.] (II.68)

*Je mehr du Gott erkennst, je mehr wirst du bekennen  
Dass du weniger ihn, was er ist, kannst nennen.*  
[The more you know God, the more you will confess  
that what really is you cannot profess.] (V.41)

<sup>351</sup> See the Latin text: "Verat enim in primis divinum praeceptum, ne alicuius rei, quam cognoscas, Deum similem putes; omnis enim intellectus, qui phantastica quadam cogitatione, quasi coniectura, divinam naturam apprehendit, simulacrum quidem Dei (εἰδωλον) finxit in mente, Deum autem non intellexit" [Indeed the divine precept forbids, before all else, thinking that anything you know were like unto God; indeed, any intellect that grasps at the divine nature through some kind of fantasy or conjecture does indeed form an image (idol) of God in the mind, but it does not know God] (Gregory of Nyssa, *De Vita Moysis* 44:376).

<sup>352</sup> See Marion (1991) as an original and recent example, beside the many authors already quoted.

<sup>353</sup> In 1653 he wrote the work *Johannes Scheffler's von Breslau gründliche Ursachen und Motiven, Warumb er von dem Lutherthum abgetreten und sich zu der catolischen Kirche bekennt hat*. His mystical tendency played an important role in this decision. See the Waldemar (1960), p. 7, and Duch (1995) editions.

<sup>354</sup> See Silesius (1960; 1995). For an English translation with parallel texts of mostly Zen tradition and an enjoyable introduction, see Franck (Silesius 1976).

*Niemand red't weniger als Gott ohn Zeit und Ort:  
Er spricht von Ewigkeit nur bloss ein einzig Wort.  
[Nobody says less than God, outside of time and space;  
a single Word from eternity he speaks.] (IV.129)*

*Wenn du an Gott gedenskst, so hörst du ihn in dir,  
Schweigst du und wärest still, er red'te für und für.  
[When you remember God and feel Him in the inner shore;  
Keep quiet and hold your peace, He will tell you more.] (V.330)*

My purpose in interjecting this brief excursus is to demonstrate the likelihood of important points of contact between Christianity and Buddhism, with a potential for cross-fertilization if we were to establish a profound relationship among them.

### *God and Beings*

Not by way of concluding a very open and barely outlined question, but merely as an appendix and synopsis, I would like to add here certain considerations that will bring us to the last stage of our investigation, the aim of which has been to present to the contemporary world a central aspect of the Buddha's message.

### *Incompatibility between the Two*

A *first consideration* regards the fact that the contemporary mentality (not by way of rebellion or recalcitrance, but out of a deeper experience and awareness of the human being) is anything but inclined to tolerate a volatilization of the concrete beings of the empirical world in favor of an eschatology, a religion, a God, or whatever else, belonging to an extra-human world. The divine reality is not there to "swallow up" beings. It is there to "empower" them from within, as it were. What has brought the traditional conception of divinity to its present crisis are not so much theological or philosophical arguments, but a lived experience of antagonism between God and beings. It almost seems that the traditional concept of God—a concept that, when all is said and done, sought only to protect, to comfort, and to ground man—now curbed human freedom or, at least, his aspiration to intramundane creation and his drive toward self-affirmation.<sup>355</sup> The traditional concept of religion seems (I repeat) to promise man another world to compensate for his renunciation of this one, and has seemed to wish to quench the human thirst for happiness with the promise of a future paradise in which all the frustrations of the present would be finally vanquished and overcome.

All contemporary efforts aim at the self-affirmation of man and if no God is capable of guaranteeing this, then man will declare himself in favor of atheism. The mentality of our world tends to see an incompatibility between God and beings: whereas in the past, the issue was how to save the "ontology" of things with regard to God (it was needful to "save appearances"), today the problem is that of finding a place for God that would not hinder beings (it appears needful to "save God"). Stripped to the bone, the question comes down to how God may be of any use (to us). And so more than one traditional religionist violently reacts to the very stating of the problem, insisting that if God exists He must have absolute priority. To which the new believers respond that, apart from the rather crude way

<sup>355</sup> Guardini, with his numerous works, would deserve particular mention here. See his three meditations of 1951.



in which the issue is sometimes presented, we must not forget that the problem of God is not only methodologically, but even ontologically, an anthropological problem. No revelation, in fact, no aspect of the divine, can today disregard human self-consciousness, which is keenly aware that the question of God deals with something that, however sublime and transcendent, must not only pass through human structures, but must ultimately resolve the anthropological problem itself.

When all is said and done, it is clear that the state of the problem of God in the contemporary mentality can no longer be crystallized in the biblical cry, "speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,"<sup>356</sup> but rather takes the form of the other cry: "Tell me your name" (Gen 32:29).<sup>357</sup>

In this sociological context we ought to also mention the emerging aspect of so-called postmodernity—which might be appropriately defined as late modernity. The world is certainly not to be considered as a mere "vale of tears," neither can religion limit itself to promising an extra-mundane consolation. However, after the initial naive optimism (now turned hypocritical) of techno-industrial civilization, in which the machine was presented as the messiah ushering in a world where milk and honey flow, the present-day technocracy has realized that such model has no future nor present. For three-quarters of its population the world has indeed turned into a valley of tears; moreover, the green (future) pastures of progress are no longer visible (believable).

Our era might indeed have need of God again. We should, however, not ignore the lesson of the last few centuries. The "new" God cannot be reduced to the regressive stance of so many fundamentalistic movements, neither can it promise future solace; it must rather be endowed with greater presence and greater strength. In short, we must purify and deepen our *vivencia*—our living experience—of the Divine.

### Relativity of the Answers

A second consideration would be, again, the problem of the insufficiency of the six "answers" we have used to group the different positions taken regarding the problem of God. None of these answers seems definitive, but neither can any of them be said to be altogether false. Each of the six aspects considered can be interpreted as a valid aspect of divinity, or of our conception of divinity. At the same time, none of the six, notwithstanding their extreme diversity on the theoretical plane, can altogether eliminate the validity of any of the others. Contemporary reflection on the problem of God cannot be legitimately regarded either as a premeditated assault on the living God, or as an outrageously *a priori* defense of the God of religion. Rather, such reflection is a humble, sincere effort to find room for what has always been called God, beyond the various functions that, in varying degrees of legitimacy, have been attributed to Him.

Nor again can it be said that God is a sort of synthesis of the various conceptions we have considered: first, because God is simple and not a combination of attributes and, second, because our conception of God should have the same simplicity if it has to approach the truth.<sup>358</sup> Some of the positions mentioned earlier, moreover, are mutually incompatible.

### A-Dualistic Irreducibility

A third consideration would highlight the antagonistic character of identity and of difference present in God. On one hand, God is that which is closest and most akin to every

<sup>356</sup> Cf. 1 Sam 3:9.

<sup>357</sup> Cf. Gen 32:30. See Saul's question when facing theophany: "Who art Thou, O Lord?" (Acts 9:5).

<sup>358</sup> Cf. Dh XX.5-6 (277-78).

single thing: God is ultimately what anything at all *is*. On the other hand, God is that which is most different, most distinct, and most removed from any being, to the point that if beings are really beings, God cannot be Being; if beings are real, God cannot be real; if things exist, God has no existence, and so on. Therefore, thinking about God transcends all categories that help man to manage in this world. Discourse about God has no terms of comparison. It is by definition unique, and consequently it is incomparable.<sup>359</sup> Once again, silence and the advaitic intuition dawn upon us.

In fact, God is neither the One nor the Other, neither equal (to us) nor different. The World and God are neither two (two of what?) nor one. It is clear that the thread always breaks at its weakest point. In absolutizing reason, God breaks and disappears, and man founders; in absolutizing God, reason breaks and explodes, and man degenerates.

The a-dualistic intuition (which, if we consider carefully, can be seen in practically all humanity's thinkers) dedivinizes reason and humanizes God, without renouncing either.

The a-dualistic intuition is not strict rational evidence, but neither is it totally incomprehensible, which would make us fall into irrationalism. We could say that the *advaita* is the intuition of the impossibility of a rational intuition of reality because it cannot be reduced to one (idealism, pantheism, monism, a certain absolute monotheism), and neither could we settle for a dualistic schizophrenia (now confiding in God as if He were everything, now ignoring Him as if He were nothing). Negation of unity is rational. The affirmation of unity is idolatry. The affirmation of duality is mortal (for the weakest of the two). Negation of duality is the fruit of the experience of the constitutive polarity of reality, whether you call it Trinitarian *perichôresis*, Buddhist *pratītiya-samutpada*, and *advaita*, Shivaite *sarvam-sarvatmakam*, Vedantic *advaita*, *Tao*, and so forth. All our study is an effort in this direction.

### The Contemporary Issue

Nevertheless, some *convictions* do seem to derive from an analysis of the contemporary situation.

*First, the problem of God cannot be avoided* in some form or another. Theism and atheism are not the only presentations of the problem: any ideology and any cosmology are nothing but attempts to resolve, in a way peculiar to each, the question of what is ultimate and definitive. Indeed, in one way or another, any philosophical system eventually runs up against the limits of its own philosophizing, and so must confront what traditionally would be called the problem of God.<sup>360</sup>

A *second* conviction seems to me equally indisputable: that *traditional answers are inadequate*. The first confirmation of this comes from the very efforts of those who consider them still valid enough to reinterpret them, translate them, and adapt them to the mentality of today. This only demonstrates that the traditional answers, though responding to a real issue, are incapable, in their present form, of convincing contemporary man.

A *third* conviction—which seems to me of almost universal validity—is the need for a purification and “*reform*” of the *very notion of God*. Perhaps even the word itself should be

<sup>359</sup> Cf. Pseudo-Hermes's beautiful definition, in the *Liber XXII Philosopherum*: “Deus est, quem solum voces non significant propter excellentiam, nec mentes intelligent propter dissimilitudinem” [God is the only one for whom words fail to express excellence, and whom minds fail to comprehend because of His dissimilarity (difference)] (Baeumker [1913], p. 36).

<sup>360</sup> See Trías (1991; 1994), who, studying the philosophical question of limitation, inevitably runs into the problem of God: we have already cited Zubiri (1985), when he says that the problem of God “is a dimension of human reality as such” (p. 12).

replaced, and if we use it here it is to avoid having to produce an endless series of synonyms and equivalents. Now, a reinterpretation of the idea of God implies not only a kind of modernization and adaptation, but a radical innovation, which we can only compare to a new stage of human consciousness, such as has perhaps (if rarely) been seen in human history. Might it not be that man has once more caught sight of the tree of life, and is now braving the angel guardian's flaming sword in order to eat of it and live eternally?<sup>361</sup> The God of religions, as they depict Him, will not suffice. The Absolute of philosophers will not suffice either, nor will the indefinite limit of scientists or the indescribable horizon of poets. Neither matter nor spirit, neither humanity nor the cosmos will be satisfied. The present malaise, and the so-called lack of faith in the sacred and the transcendent are an ongoing and positive sign of this new quest for the ever unknown God.

Let us attempt to present a map of the terrain in which contemporary mortals move in this quest.

God is neither transcendent nor immanent. God is neither ourselves, abiding in immanent identity with us, nor another being, elsewhere in Olympian remoteness. God is neither the same as the world nor different from it. He cannot be identified with man, but neither can He be separated from him. In a word, He neither exists nor does not exist.<sup>362</sup> To say this does not mean abdicating rationality, or attempting to escape from this world by placing God beyond human disputes. On the contrary, it means placing God at the very heart of all that is human. To be sure, our age does not yet have its hand on the intellectual tools necessary to express this, its deepest intuition. Yet every individual coming into this world has a part in this light. *Nec tecum possum vivere, nec sine te* (I cannot live with or without you), as the Latin poet Martial said. God's presence is disturbing and His absence is agonizing. Traditional language fails to convince us; modern formulations, on their part, are obviously inadequate. Perhaps we may say that one of the convictions of today's humanity comes down to a glimmer of what, discerned in its totality, would be the mystical intuition that God cannot be a substantive noun nor the subject of any sentence (because God is not a substance), and neither a predicate object (because this would represent the reification and destruction of precisely what God means to be).<sup>363</sup> This is what the Western and Christian mentality is slowly<sup>364</sup> rediscovering<sup>365</sup> today.

## The Silence of the Buddha

### *The Courage of Silence*

The statues of the Buddha, as we know, appeared only after the Hellenic spirit fecundated the mind of the Indic people (one wonders whether Buddhism might otherwise have

<sup>361</sup> Cf. Gen 3:24.

<sup>362</sup> "Ultra omnia quae sunt et quae non sunt" is a recurrent expression from Plotinus to the Renaissance. See Duns Scotus and Jeanneau's notes (1969), pp. 202ff.

<sup>363</sup> Here also, liturgical prayer carries an extraordinary impact: "Ut qui sine te esse non possumus, secundum te vivere valeamus" [That we who without Thee are unable to be, may become able to live according to Thee].

<sup>364</sup> See Robinson and Edwards (1963); Hochstaffl (1976).

<sup>365</sup> See Tillich (1948), p. 65, and other modern testimonials from the Christian world. He states, for example, that an initiation to the religious problem of our time ought to take place through "accepting the void which is the destiny of our period, by accepting it as a 'sacred void,' which may qualify and transform thinking and action."

maintained an iconographic silence). They are peaceful, smiling, as if seeing without looking, freezing as it were the question, as if dissolving the anxious inquiring of the men who gaze on them. They give no answer, only help in glimpsing that the question itself is meaningless not because it is ill posed, but because it lacks any foundation. Buddhist iconography seems to steep all things in an atmosphere in which transcendence is irrelevant, an atmosphere that simply eliminates the anguish of any issue.<sup>366</sup> It is not only that the Buddha himself is silent but that He silences all anxiety and perplexity, revealing its irrelevance. When we approach with deference Gautama, the Buddha, suddenly it is as if the question that had led us to address him had simply vanished.

### *The Pacifying of the Question*

As I have already observed, not only is the Buddha silent, but his answer is also silence. Now I must add something more.

It is not simply that his is a silent answer, whereas many others are loud and full of words. There is something else altogether. The Buddha gives no answer because he eliminates the question. It is not that he does not answer, but strictly speaking, he reveals that we do not know what we are asking. He pacifies our anxieties, our thirst for knowing, going, getting there, possessing, having power . . . our thirst for being. The Buddha would have us humble.<sup>367</sup>

Some readers might have been surprised at the harsh reaction of the Awakened One when one of his disciples sought to know the destiny of man and unveil the mystery of life. This attitude seems to contradict what might appear as a norm from an anthropological point of view, and in Europe as well as in pre- or extra-Buddhist India, is regarded not only as inescapable but also positive and necessary for authentic human life.<sup>368</sup> From Plato to Kant—as well as before and after<sup>369</sup>—it has always been the peculiar trait of Western man to believe that asking the ultimate questions regarding the meaning of life was a measure of the human degree of civilization and that religion offered answers to the questions on which a fully human life depends.<sup>370</sup> How can we give meaning to our daily actions without knowing

<sup>366</sup> An example of what I mean to say are the statues of the Buddha in one of the caves in Ellora. There are some twenty of them, all identical at first sight, all representing the Buddha in meditation, but each actually a bit more detached from the world than the previous one, until finally there is a quantum leap between the second to last, with its maximal degree of perfection on "this side," and the very last one, which seems to have overcome, in peace and serenity, all mortal limits. See, for example, Gupta (1972), tables 2c–2d. See also the artistic volume by Auboyer (1983) and the equally beautiful work published by Kurata and Tamura (1987).

<sup>367</sup> Cf. a testimony of Christian spirituality close to Buddhist feeling: "Est-ce que l'humilité, Seigneur, au lieu de consister à entretenir à mon sujet une opinion basse ou moyenne, ne demanderait pas tout simplement de renoncer à toute opinion quelconque? . . . Ce que je vaud, au fond je n'en sais rien et je ne saurai jamais rien ici-bas" [May it be, Lord, that humility, rather than consisting in a low, high, or halfway opinion of myself, simply ask me to renounce having any opinion at all? . . . When all is said and done, here below I do not know nor shall I ever know anything of what I am worth] (Charles [1947], p. 149).

<sup>368</sup> Cf. Panikkar (1969/6); Piantelli (1974) on the conditions that philosophical tradition sets for an authentic philosophizing as laid down, for example, by Śaṅkara.

<sup>369</sup> "Wer sind wir? Wo kommen wir her? Wohin gehen wir? Was erwarten wir? Was erwartet uns?" [Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? What do we hope? What awaits us?] are the first words of E. Bloch's prologue (1958). See also SB II.2 and parallel passages.

<sup>370</sup> Let us consider (as it is less known) the typical claim of the Gnostic and its difference with the Buddhist spirit. According to Hans Jonas, *Gnôsis* (second edition of the original German), I.2.261.

the ultimate purpose of these actions? How can man commit himself to a truly transcendent endeavor if he does not even know where he comes from, where he is going, and what his purpose in life might be? Ultimately, the entire discussion, regarding not only the proof of the existence of God, but on God Himself, is based on this presupposition, regarded as basic and unshakable: God is the mysterious key that gives meaning to existence, personal, historical, and cosmic, of man, society, and the world. Without Providence, without an End and without Creation, man collapses, society destroys itself, and the cosmos falls apart.

One of the things we see in the texts to which I have referred is the attitude of "holy indifference" on the part of the Buddha, not for things of little account, but for what human beings—with perhaps an excess of seriousness—have always regarded as the most important, most transcendent thing in their lives. The Buddha's first lesson in this regard is a lesson of common sense: if the questions of God's existence, of afterlife and similar issues, were really as vitally important as they were considered to be, they would not generate doubts of all kinds and would appear self-evident to all men without so many complications. As air is necessary for life, and as each man either has access to air and breathes (or else dies of asphyxiation), so, likewise, if these inquiries were as vital as we are led to believe, we could not live without giving them an answer. Yet history and everyday experience alike teach us that very few individuals claim a more or less precise answer to such problems. Moreover, the rest do not die a slow death from asphyxiation, in the first place because the ones "who know" also pay their tribute to death, and in the second place because we have no objective criterion by which to diagnose the death of those who "do not know" as a death by asphyxiation. Not only should the sheer multiplicity of opinions be a scandal that would demolish the very basis of what we seek to prove (how could there be so many different answers to a problem that is identical for all?)—but it should also show us that it is not such a crucial problem after all since it is possible to live without solving it.<sup>371</sup>

And so the Buddha seems to wish to do without these "fundamental" issues altogether and does not react to the question.

On the other hand, modern atheism is intent on demonstrating that it is both theoretically and practically possible to have a meaningful and even morally positive life without recourse to the hypothesis of a "God" to provide the whole cosmic and human construction with an ultimate, definitive support. But although this new proposal on the part of contemporary atheism is surely fascinating and has a great appeal for a great portion of humanity—its application in the philosophical or political field has often produced effects that would seem to corroborate the pessimism of those who remain attached to the "theistic" tradition: without an external, "transcendent" support, man fails to cope and falls into chaos, dejection, or existential despair, and the total exploitation of his fellow men. In fact, contingency, even regarded in its positive aspect and in its constitutive radicality, remains transient, without a foundation and therefore "contingent." Wanting to build upon it, seeking to consolidate it,

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quoted by Cullmann (1965), pp. 8–9, gnosticism could be characterized by a sentence from Clement of Alexandria (*Exa Theodoti* 78.2): "Who we were, what we have become, where we have fallen, to what depths do we plunge, whence we have been rescued, with what birth and what rebirth?" It is significant that *gnōsis* seems to be again popular today, not only in its exotic aspects, but also in its historical reality and in the pertinence of its message. See also Jonas (1967); Monserrat Torrents (1983); Schultz (1986); Sloterdijk and Macho (1991), etc. Also of interest is the journal *Gnōsis*.

<sup>371</sup> Cf. the celebrated question put by the angel of the Lord to Manoach: "Why do you ask my name?" (Judg 13:18; cf. Gen 32:30; Ex 3:13; Ps 67:36 [Vulgate]; Isa. 9:6 [5]; and the interpretation of Eckhart, for example. See the masterly comment by Lossky (1960) in his first chapter, "Nomen innominabile," and in the second, "Nomen omnominabile" (pp. 13–96).

can lead only to collapse. The Buddha's position, in the radicality of his discovery, lies precisely in revealing how groundless this contingency is without "reabsorbing" it into any God.

The Buddha dissolves the very root of the problem—not through a direct, violent denial of God, nor again through some harmonization of the different paths, but showing us the *superfluity* of the very question of God and of an afterworld, the *vacuity* of any possible answer, nevertheless without renouncing the possibility of an outcome in terms of salvation and liberation. The Buddha's argument—if we may call it such, and if we may break for a moment the Buddha's silence—unfolds along the following lines.

Concerning the *superfluity* of the question: the message of the Awakened One rests on the fact, on the basis of everyday experience, that preoccupation with these problems very often fails to lead either to their solution or to a better life. Moreover, anxiety about such questions is one of the causes of evil on earth. Man's dissatisfaction generates a constant state of discontent, constantly seeking further and urging himself onward, battered, breathless, and troubled, in his quest for the "answer" he has not yet found. And when he thinks he has found it, his peace is short-lived, because sooner or later he will encounter someone claiming to have found a different answer, incompatible with his own. And so he returns to seeking and doubting if not to fighting his opponent.

As for the *vacuity* of the answer: the Buddha teaches us that any possible answer can only be *empty*, not so much because the number of answers equals the number of human beings, but since the context of the answer is inevitably conditioned by the question and because the question necessarily arises within the contingent space inhabited by man—not excluding his intellect—the answer will only be as contingent as the question. This is certainly not what we seek from an answer that we would like to be ultimate. In fact, what is being sought is precisely something that will save us from contingency.<sup>372</sup> Supposing, even merely for discussion's sake, that the answer were of a transcendent order, this answer would no longer be relevant to the question—nor would it really be intelligible.

Of course, the logical objection to this line of reasoning would be that it is based on a particular sort of metaphysics, far from being universally accepted. Such an objection will scarcely unsettle the Buddhist. For him, all schools of metaphysics arrive or can arrive at such conclusions, and in fact, from this point of view, all metaphysics are equivalent to each other. The Buddha's answer is silence—not silence as a different kind of answer, however, but rather as going beyond any answer, as a consequence of its subtle invitation to eliminate the very question; in other words, acknowledging the radical inadequacy between the source of our questioning (dissatisfaction and contingency) and the only possible adequate answer—which could scarcely be an answer to the question asked, given that the answer must necessarily belong to the very order in which the question itself can never arise. The Buddha, like Jesus, is not antimetaphysical but seems uninterested—and invites us to be uninterested—in metaphysical speculations.<sup>373</sup>

And this leads us at once to discover the  *nihility* of any question regarding that which, by its very nature, transcends the relative. Here we must be careful, however. We have already

<sup>372</sup> Consider the effort made by neo-Scholasticism in seeking a way of transcendence through the analysis of human intelligence. Such names spring to mind as Cardinal Mercier, De la Taille, Maréchal, Rousselot, Garrigou-Lagrange, Valensin, Gilson, and Karl Rahner.

<sup>373</sup> "A brother asked the abbot Besarius, 'What is needful?' and he answered, 'Keep silence and do not judge yourself'" (*Apophthegmata Patrum* [PG 65:141]). Another Desert Father, Andrew, says that three things are needful for the monk: (ἡ ξενιτεία, ἡ πτωχεία καὶ ἡ σιωπὴ ἐν ὑπομονῇ); "secessus a patria, paupertas et in tolerantia silentium," says Migne's Latin translation (nonattachment [exile from the fatherland], poverty and silence in patience [tolerance]).

recalled that the Buddha is not an agnostic: "To him the issue is not "giving up" the knowledge of the answer, or in some negative form of asceticism, based, in turn, on a fideism that would lead us to disregard even what we consider to be the most important thing in life—to trust something or someone. It is a matter of discovering that any statement of the problem in space and time will inevitably be caught in these very same limited coordinates. In other words, man, in his itinerant, contingent condition, cannot leap over his own shadow. His question, then, can receive no satisfactory answer. After all, if he were to find such an answer, things would be even worse: the answer would represent the absolutization of contingency, the capture of the Absolute in the nets of what is conditioned."<sup>374</sup>

Will not the issue then consist in accepting the utter transcendence of God, or of any Absolute, where intellectualism or voluntarism are concerned? The idea of God is not God.<sup>375</sup> The desire of God does not necessarily lead to Him.<sup>376</sup>

To ask questions about God, when God is by definition what renders the very question possible, would mean to enter into a vicious circle. At the same time, if one would take God's silence as a "proof" that God does not exist, the fact that I obtain no answer to my question about God would by no means prove that God does not exist. Let God's existence be affirmed or denied as it may: neither "answer" will be of any importance, for both are equally invalid.

When all is said and done, therefore, what the Buddha would have us understand is that the so-called ultimate question is unfounded and irrelevant. He leads us to discover that our very inquiry proceeds from an erroneous presupposition, deriving as it does from the illusion of the creature's belief that it might overleap its own shadow. This is what the Buddha continued to tell us with his refusal to answer. In his own words, according to tradition, when a certain monk asked him the purpose of *nirvāṇa*, Gautama answered, "O Radha, this question cannot set its own boundaries."<sup>377</sup> By this he meant that the question is unintelligible in itself, since one does not know what he is asking. How, then, could one understand the reply? The text continues saying, "The roots of pure life are in *nibbāna*, Radha. *Nibbāna* is its own goal; *nibbāna* is its own end."<sup>378</sup>

### *The Middle Path*

Nevertheless, Buddhism cannot be accused of preaching a nihilistic methodology. Few religions in the world have defined with more attention the infinite anthropological traits necessary for man to discover the meaning of life. The Buddha was undoubtedly soberer in formulations than his disciples, but not any less clear. The middle path is truly a way and a real path, because it is indeed, and aspires to be, a way to realization and not to mere rationalization.

<sup>374</sup> "After the leap shall we hear the thunder of emptiness?" wrote the exiled Cuban author Severo Sarduy in his last days (1993), after being gratuitously tortured. It is interesting to notice that he quotes Baruch 3:23, and in the best Scholastic tradition, he uses the text out of context: "Viam autem sapientiam nescierunt neque commemorati sunt semitas eius," which he translates as, "Nobody knows the ways (of wisdom) nor can think those ways," in *El País*, August 14, 1993, pp. 10–11.

<sup>375</sup> See a parallel problem in Ebert, "Der Mensch als Weg zu Gott," pp. 297–317. Consider also the Thomistic difficulty in asserting the possibility of knowing the "existence" of God and therefore in defending the coincidence of God's essence and existence. In such a case, either we know God's essence, or what we know of God is not His true existence?

<sup>376</sup> Cf. Alfaro (1952) and Lubac (1965) to avoid quoting the many theological discussions on the "natural appetite of God."

<sup>377</sup> Cf. SN III.189.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid. See my comment in Panikkar (1983/XXVII), pp. 257–76.

It is not merely a midway point between two horizontal paths, between the opposite poles of two contrasting opinions, but it is in the middle because it stops with restraint between extremes and does not insist on taking us to a limit that is still a projection of our mind; it is a middle path also in vertical terms, since it stops where the way would represent an inner contradiction. There is room to go somewhere as long as you are reaching for a goal; but once you have gone beyond the threshold of the "pure land," any path can only lead out of paradise.

"There exists, O brahmin Moggallana, a *nibbāna* and a path that leads to *nibbāna*, and I am here as one who shows the way. Among the disciples whom I exhort and teach, some reach the supreme goal, the *nibbāna*, others do not reach it. The Tathāgata, O brahmin Moggallana, only shows the way."<sup>379</sup>

The Buddhist middle path consists in not seeking to bring anything to the extreme, because making anything absolute, even thinking, would be idolatry.<sup>380</sup> To exhaust the truth and reach by deduction all consequences, besides being a proud claim, to Śākyamuni is a form of wicked rationalism. It would be like turning reason on itself, almost like an octopus; it would lose its inner life.<sup>381</sup> Equally wrong, however, would be to despise thinking, to embrace contradiction, without caring for the needs of reason. Repeatedly the Buddha has preached,

The world attaches itself in succession to existence and nonexistence: everything exists, this is an extreme: nothing exists, here is the other extreme. But he that possesses the right vision of things as they are does not affirm that things do not exist, since they are produced, nor that they exist, since they perish, and so the Tathāgata, avoiding the two extremes, teaches the middle path. . . . Whoever has the right vision is not prisoner of his own ideas as people in the world; he who does not attach himself to a system nor seek mere speculation, he who does not think, "This is my *ātman*," but tells himself, "All that appears is suffering," he sees himself freed from doubt and unrest.<sup>382</sup>

Again the same idea appears: seeking coherence at all costs (Pascal might say "wanting to be an angel"),<sup>383</sup> wanting to make anything absolute in this world means committing the great religious sin.<sup>384</sup>

The Buddha's pedagogy does not consist in teaching solutions but in inviting us to dissolve the very way the issue is defined, acknowledging its inadequacy because the same ego that is positing the issue causes it to be formulated incorrectly.

Siddhārta Gautama is perfectly aware of what he preaches; he realizes he is setting in motion for the first time the Wheel of the Law (*dharmacakra*) with the first Sarnath sermon.

<sup>379</sup> MN III.6.

<sup>380</sup> Cf. the opposite attitude of Zoroaster—more or less a contemporary of the Buddha—in which the Absolute appears, at least in the name (Ahura Mazda means "thinking Lord") as the sublimation of thinking.

<sup>381</sup> This would be precisely the *pratyavṛtti* "reversal in the deepest seat of consciousness," according to the Suzuki translation (1930).

<sup>382</sup> SN II.17. See other texts previously quoted.

<sup>383</sup> "L'homme n'est ni ange ni bête et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête" [Man is neither angel nor beast, and ill fortune turns the man wanting to be an angel into a beast] (Pascal, *Pensées*, n. 329 [Brunschvicg, n. 358]).

<sup>384</sup> See Qo 7:16–19, where the same idea of a "middle way" is emphasized, with an invitation not to bring things to their extremity.



This truth that I have found is deep, hidden, hard to understand, peaceful, subtle, beyond thinking (*atakkavacara*), abstract in such a way that only the wise can grasp it. The majority of people, on the contrary, are attached and emotionally bound to their attachments and rejoice in them (*alaya*). It is difficult for these people to understand the conditioned origin of all things (*patiasamuppada*), the law of correlation, as well as the elimination of all causal energies, the renunciation of any substrate (*uphadi*) of existence, the suppression of passion (of any emotional overload; *viraga*); the calm (control, eradication; *nirodha*), the liberation (*nibbāna*).<sup>385</sup>

Independently from the belief common to almost all religions (not excluding texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*<sup>386</sup> and the Gospels,<sup>387</sup> according to which few are those who are able to understand, and fewer still those able to follow the way of salvation), the position of the Buddha is amazingly modern. He does not claim that religions will give us an answer, but his aspiration is that man would stop playing at being a little God reciting a part that is not his. The Buddha asks that man would simply understand the impermanence of all that exists, including himself, without leaning on any "answer"; he demands a total and unconditioned *élan*, unconcerned with support, not even by the very subject of action, but totally transcending it.<sup>388</sup>

What the Buddha says (without saying so) to those able to receive it is that you must dare enter into silence, you must be willing to lose your life altogether, irrespective of any object and ready to let the subject go. What Siddhārtha suggests is not to put an object in front of our faith; otherwise we objectify, we turn it into "something" and therefore we destroy it. Faith is basically not an intellectual act (though a dimension of faith may be intellectual); rather it is of the human person as a whole.<sup>389</sup> The perfect and universal formulation of faith is not "I believe in God," but "I believe," through which total surrender is expressed, the surrender in the answer of the man born blind in the Gospel: "Lord, I believe!"<sup>390</sup>

Faith is a mere act of openness: any objectivation alters and alienates it. Even the presence of God hinders the constitutive openness of faith. Neither Buddha, nor Christ, nor the Prophet can remain beside the believers without representing a dangerous obstacle for the faith of the "faithful."

Kill whomever you will meet on your way. If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha; if you meet the Patriarchs, kill the Patriarchs; if you find the *Arhat*, kill them also.<sup>391</sup>

<sup>385</sup> DN II.36; MhvagVP I.5.2. Cf. MN I.167ff.; SN I.136.

<sup>386</sup> Cf., e.g., III.32; IV.40; VII.3; XII.5.

<sup>387</sup> Cf., e.g., Mt 7:13–14; 22:14; Lk 10:24; 13:23–24.

<sup>388</sup> As a mere example of modern mentality, cf. Fontinell (1966), p. 39. The author and coeditor of the review does not cite Buddhism but nevertheless writes, "Faith is *without* God. . . . The believer must be willing to work for values in the same way that he would just as if God did not exist. . . . The believer, I suggest, must act *without* God. And so must the atheist. They share the same existential situation." We are inclined to think that the author is taking into consideration the other religions of the world because the famous text he quotes on page 40 (on the torch to burn heaven and the water to extinguish hell) is not, as far as we know, of Christian origin, but Muslim sufi, attributed to the famous Rabi'a. See, for sources, Anawati and Gardet (1960), p. 173. See also Fontinell (1986), particularly pp.132ff.

<sup>389</sup> Cf. Panikkar (1983/XXVII), pp. 185–229.

<sup>390</sup> Jn 9:38. See also "Credo! Aduiva incredulitatem meam" [I believe! Help Thou my unbelief] (Mk 9:24). Although in these cases there is someone to talk to, "thou" is not an object.

<sup>391</sup> *Taishō* 45.500b, in Ch'en (1964), p. 358.

The Buddha himself warns that he will disappear from the earth and enter irrevocably into *nirvāṇa*, so that people may overcome their laziness and try to seek and follow the way on their own:

If the Tathāgata announces his entering into *nirvāṇa*, people will be anxious to follow the way; if the Blessed One remained, people would become lazy.<sup>392</sup>

As a help and guide he will leave with them the *dharma* and the *saṃgha*. Christians are required to have a similar attitude: if you meet the Christ, eat Him!<sup>393</sup> And the Master of Nazareth announced that it was necessary for Him to go away, otherwise the Comforter would not come, the Spirit that works inwardly,<sup>394</sup> and He would leave along with the Eucharist, the Church, the community entrusted with his message.<sup>395</sup>

### *Meditative Silence*

According to Buddhist tradition, which is echoed also by other mystical traditions, from a practical point of view there are three types of silence: silence of the body, of the voice, and of thought.<sup>396</sup> All three are important and necessary for asceticism, but obviously what is most important and most difficult to reach is the silence of the mind, to which the other two kinds are subordinated.<sup>397</sup> In order to achieve it, we must venture into the deepest silence of our being, quieting all the inner sounds of our thinking faculty.<sup>398</sup>

In order to understand what we are saying, and still have to say, it is indispensable to enter into the true silence of the mind. All the Buddha's teaching aims at reaching such silence, and in order to enter it the Buddha and Buddhism have stressed meditation, contemplation, peace of mind, and inner silence, rather than speculation or doctrine.

Cultivate concentration, O *bhikkhu*, for the *bhikkhu* with a concentrated mind knows things as they truly are.<sup>399</sup>

<sup>392</sup> Cf. *SadDharmPundS* XV, pp. 268–72.

<sup>393</sup> Cf. *Jn* 6:51ff.

<sup>394</sup> See *Jn* 15:7.

<sup>395</sup> This is a trait common to any religious reform (social, political, etc.): the refusal of traditional religion in favor of a religion or spirituality focusing on inner salvation. The immediate intervention of "idols" or God is substituted by the authority of the human community: the *saṃgha* for the Buddhist, the *sampradaya* for the Hinduist, the *qahal* for the Jews, the *umma* for the Muslims, the *ecclesia* for the Christians, the state for the Marxists, etc.

<sup>396</sup> The fifth sermon on the law, recommended by Aśoka for reading and meditation, is the *Moneya Sutta*, or discourse on silence, with the triple division indicated therein. See *DN* III.220; *Iti* 56.

<sup>397</sup> It is known that Pythagoras required of his disciples a novitiate of five years' silence: "Hoc sibi vult etiam Pythagorae quinque annorum silentium, quod praecipuit discipulis, ut scilicet, aversi a rebus sensibilibus, nuda mente Deum contemplantur" [This also Pythagoras wished for his disciples when he prescribed five years of silence so that leaving aside the senses they might contemplate with naked (pure) mind God] (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* V.11).

<sup>398</sup> I suspect that with a different technique the "stopping the world" of the teachings of Don Juan, made famous by Castaneda, is precisely this "silence of thought" to which I am alluding. See Castaneda (1984).

<sup>399</sup> *SN* III.13.

In a way, it could be said that Buddhism is only a practice of meditation, intended, however, not as discursive meditation but as inner contemplation. All that the Buddha says acquires meaning and beauty if understood from the standpoint of contemplation. If we leave aside or neglect the way of meditation, we fall into pure dialectics and subtle elucubrations and we miss the Buddha's message as we do not understand what He wishes to communicate to us.

Therefore, O Ānanda, a man who tries to practice *dhyana* (meditation) without having reached the control of the mind is like one trying to make bread with a mixture of sand.<sup>400</sup>

Strictly speaking, we cannot speak of Buddhism. We should enter into silence.<sup>401</sup>

These considerations on meditation can help us to contextualize from a phenomenological point of view the function of Buddhist silence. It is, in fact, well known that silence occupies a relevant place in many rites: along with action there is meditation, and next to the word we also find silence.<sup>402</sup> In few religions has reflexive elaboration been as careful and detailed as in Vedic worship, and since this is the starting horizon for Buddhism, it should not be irrelevant to dedicate to it a brief excursus.<sup>403</sup>

In Vedic worship there are formulations that must be quoted or sung clearly by the priests and by the celebrant, imperceptible whispers that must be uttered by the priest, and finally addresses that must be "thought" only silently with the mind (*manas*)<sup>404</sup> of the celebrant. To this we must add the times of external silence, when certain actions must be accomplished "in silence" (*tuṣṭim*). It is to be noted that "in many cases the silent act is the one addressed to Prajapati," since silence belongs to Prajapati<sup>405</sup> and with silence he is propitiated.<sup>406</sup> Prajapati is sacrifice par excellence,<sup>407</sup> the personification of the act of worship.<sup>408</sup> Silence and Prajapati at a certain point are identified to such an extent that the silent act of the sacrificer, such as spreading the antelope's skin (another typical ritual act) is equivalent to sacrifice itself because Sacrifice is Prajapati and Prajapati is ineffable.<sup>409</sup>

On the other hand, however, Vedic literature feels the need to justify with a myth the fact that silence has become part of the ritual. The absence of the Word is one of the culminating actions in the ritual offering to the One personifying Sacrifice in its totality, and it is explained as the "withdrawal" of the Word (*vac*) before the preeminence of the Spirit (*manas*) affirmed

<sup>400</sup> SuS in Goddard (1956), p. 263.

<sup>401</sup> The bibliography on meditation in Buddhism is immense; I shall make reference only to the general works indicated.

<sup>402</sup> It is interesting to note that, as a consequence of a renewed valorization of the sacraments initiated in Christianity by the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church determined (June 1968) that the sacrament of priestly ordination be conferred in silence, by the simple imposition of hands.

<sup>403</sup> In the two following paragraphs we refer to the well-documented study by Renou (1949), as well as Lévi (1966), in particular chap. 1.

<sup>404</sup> Cf. Malamoud (1975), where the author studies some Brahmanic rituals: the entire issue of the review is interesting.

<sup>405</sup> *Śabaravamin* II.2.10, in Renou (1949), p. 13.

<sup>406</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>407</sup> See, for example, AB VII.7.2 (XXXII/1); GopB II.18; SB I.7.4.4; etc. See SB VI.4.1.6.

<sup>408</sup> For an exposition of how such an identification came about, see Vescei (1985).

<sup>409</sup> "Then, having deposited [a piece of clay, representing Agni] on the skin of a black antelope, since the black antelope is the sacrifice . . . [the priest] spreads out [the skin] in silence, as the black antelope skin is the sacrifice and the sacrifice is Prajapati and Prajapati is ineffable."

by Prajapati, in the diatribe that had arisen between the two.<sup>410</sup> It is likely, therefore, that the introduction of silence into sacrifice was the consequence of a more or less official acceptance of mysticism in the very heart of the brahminic Cult.<sup>411</sup> In fact, holding in the Word as an act of worship becomes the keystone in the passage from ritual worship, as an act actually accomplished, to its transposition and sublimation into inner ascesis. By withholding the word, sacrifice with its power is transferred into the inner life of the individual. The individual is purified through silence.<sup>412</sup> When someone is silent, breathing devours the word.<sup>413</sup>

The value of ritual silence is enormous, since ultimately it joins us directly to the Divine; it is endowed with special power: it is the eye and root of sacrifice;<sup>414</sup> it makes sacrifice visible.<sup>415</sup> To make a silent oblation means going beyond distinction, conquering the divine glory (to the point of conferring it to Divinity itself),<sup>416</sup> conquering totality,<sup>417</sup> the unlimited,<sup>418</sup> reaching the ineffable,<sup>419</sup> "since what is not obtained with words is obtained through silence"<sup>420</sup> (and we have seen how thought is intimately related to silence). It means, ultimately, bringing sacrifice to completion,<sup>421</sup> and it is particularly indicated in funeral rituals,<sup>422</sup> and in expiation,<sup>423</sup> in other words, where undefined forces come into play.<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>410</sup> See SB I.4.5.8–10, where we hear of the dispute between Word (*vac*) and Spirit (*manas*) as to which of the two had preeminence. The decision was referred to Prajapati, who pronounced in favor of spirit. The text goes on to say, "Word, thus contradicted, fell into consternation and dismay. Word then addressed Prajapati thus: 'Never more shall I be thy vehicle of sacrifice, as thou hast outraged me thus.' Thenceforth any sacrifice offered to Prajapati must be accomplished under one's breath, as word will no more serve as his vehicle of sacrifice."

<sup>411</sup> Cf., e.g., "Prajapati desired, 'That I may be able to be more than one; that I may be able to reproduce myself'; he meditated in silence [*tuṣṭim*]: in his own mind (*manas*); what was in his mind became the sacred formula [*brhat*]" (PVB VII.6.1).

<sup>412</sup> Cf. "And when [the celebrant withholds the word], word is the sacrifice: herewith it bears the sacrifice within itself" (SB III.2.138).

<sup>413</sup> See AA III.1.6.

<sup>414</sup> Cf. "Silent praise is the eye of the sacrifice" (AB II.32.4 [IX.8]): "In silence make this offer, which is the root of the sacrifice; since indeed the root is silent and in it the voice does not sound" (SB I.4.4.10).

<sup>415</sup> Cf. "Having repeated the *samidhenis* formula, the Gods could not see the sacrifice. Prajapati poured the butter in silence. Then the Gods were able to see the sacrifice. The sprinkling in silence [was instrumental] in bringing the sacrifice to light" (TS II.5.11.3). See also "As if the word covered or hid the sacrifice," comments Renou (1949, p. 14), or even obscured its light (TS VI.3.7.1–2).

<sup>416</sup> Cf. "He offers in silence. . . . Thus he gives the Gods divine glory."

<sup>417</sup> Cf. ". . . and he does so in silence, for what is silent is indeterminate, and the indeterminate is totality" (SB VII.2.2.14).

<sup>418</sup> Cf. TB III.2.7.3

<sup>419</sup> Cf. TS VI.2.7.3.

<sup>420</sup> PVB IV.9.10.

<sup>421</sup> Cf. "In silence . . . he ascends [to one of the three fires, the *ahavaniya*], thinking, 'The sacrifice will be accomplished toward the East'" (SB I.9.3.22).

<sup>422</sup> Cf. SB XII.5.1.9: "In silence . . . he pours it [into the spoon] but once, thus rendering it sacred to the ancestors."

<sup>423</sup> See, e.g., "And having boiled [the blood that has contaminated the milk of the offering], he offers it in silence in an indefinite manner, since Prajapati is indefinite and the *agnihotra* is sacred to Prajapati; and the indefinite also signifies totality; thus he makes expiation through totality" (SB XII.4.2.1).

<sup>424</sup> Cf. Renou (1949), p. 14: ". . . Selon les Brâhmana, à côté du domaine des choses exprimées (*nirukta*), qui est celui de la parole, il y a un domaine des choses inexprimées (*anirukta*), non définies.

When all is said and done, silence in worship is more than a ritual, more than a means: it is the very aim that we reach through silence itself.<sup>425</sup> This is why no religion can do without silence.<sup>426</sup> Even in the Jewish and Christian traditions, in which praise is often the main portion of worship, one cannot avoid becoming silent when immediate contact with God takes place.<sup>427</sup> Moreover, silence is the organ of contemplative life: silence not only silences the word, but most of all goes beyond thought.<sup>428</sup> Silence belongs to mystery.<sup>429</sup>

### *The Four Noble Truths*

The following text is an expression of the religious spirit of our time. Most of humanity's religious traditions aim at "liberating" the world and man, although from very diverse horizons. Buddhism concentrates on the elimination of suffering, but this negative approach conceals a certain positivity, and this is what we would like to express through the following new formulation of the message of the Awakened One. While, as we have seen, the key word of the Sarnath sermon is *dukkha*, the key word of our text is *sukha* (happiness), a word that has been present in our reflection.<sup>430</sup>

"There is no happiness in what is limited. Only the infinite is happiness," says an ancient Upaniṣad.<sup>431</sup>

The very same Upaniṣad adds that what is finite is mortal.<sup>432</sup>

Can a contemporary author claim such an authority? To fail to respect at least one of the

non limitées, incertaines (*anaddha*). . . L'anirukta caractérise entre autres choses la durée de la vie, l'avenir, le souffle e surtout la pensée (*manas*) ou son 'expression', le silence" [ . . . According to the Brahmanas, alongside the field of things "expressed" (*nirukta*), which is that of the word, there is also a field of things "inexpressible," not defined, not limited, uncertain. . . The *anirukta* characterizes, among other things, the duration of life, the future, the wind, and, especially, thought, or its "expression," silence].

<sup>425</sup> "Das kultische Schweigen überhaupt kann dreifacher Art sein; das wartende Schweigen, das sakramentale Schweigen und das einende Schweigen" [Ritual silence can belong to three different classes: silence in waiting, sacramental silence, and silence of union] (R. Otto [1920], p. 185).

<sup>426</sup> "Apud te est os meum sine voce, et silentium meum loquitur tibi" [United with Thee my mouth has no voice and my silence speaks to Thee], Kempis accurately says (*Imitatio Christi* III.21.18).

<sup>427</sup> See, for example, "Silete a facie Domine Dei" [Make silence in the presence of the Lord] (Wis 1:7); "Dominus autem in templo sancto suo; / sileat a facie eius omnis terra" [The Lord is in his holy temple. / Let the earth keep silent before him] (Hab 2:20); "sileat omnis caro a facie Domini, / qui consurrexit de habitaculo sancto suo" [Let all flesh keep still before the Lord, / for he has come out from his holy dwelling] (Zech 2:17). Cf. Isa. 51:1; Ps 51:1; 75:9; Rev 8:1.

<sup>428</sup> Cf. in Christianity also the ascetic expression, which eventually became commonplace, of Anthony the First Hermit: "The prayer in which the monk has an understanding of himself or what he recites (meditates, contemplates) is not perfect" (Cassian, *Collationes Patrum* IX.31 (PL 49:808)).

<sup>429</sup> "Stille gehört zum Mysterium. Das deutet Gregor von Nazianzen, wenn er bei der Schilderung des Todes seiner Schwester Gorgonia in *Oratio* 8.22 (PG 35:813), sagt: 'σιγή δὲ βαθεῖα, καὶ τελευτή ὁ θάνατος' [Silence belongs to mystery. Gregory of Nazianzus intimates this when, at the deathbed of his sister, Gorgonia, he says in *Oratio*, "Profound silence, and, also, in the end, death"] (Dolger [1936], p. 49). See also the thesis of Casel (1919), advocate of the Mysterien Theologie, and Gawronski (1995).

<sup>430</sup> Let us add that *sukha*, which derives from *su* and *khami* (running well, lightly), also has another etymology that incorporates the prefix *su* (which corresponds to the Greek εὖ), which means good, pleasant, well, positive. *Sukha* is the word we translate as *happiness*. Cf. the Gospel (εὐ-αγγελιον), good news, happy news, joyous proclamation, message of joy. Cf. also euphory, etc.

<sup>431</sup> *Na alpe sukham asti, bhuma-eva sukham* (CU VII.23; VII.24.1).

<sup>432</sup> *Alpa* means small, little, limited. Cf. ἀλαπαδνός, "weak" (that can be easily destroyed).

conditions set by the Buddhist tradition for acknowledging the authenticity of its doctrine would be modern desecration. Even though the text I refer to does not contain with utter certainty his *ipsissima verba*, the following "four authorities" come from a tradition that is still alive.

If someone says, "This have I heard (1) from the teacher, (2) from a community, (3) from wise men, (4) from a single venerable monk, then we should verify the words that have been transmitted, and if they agree with the Sutta Piṭaka and with the Vinaya Piṭaka, we would be authorized to say that these words proceed from the Awakened One."<sup>433</sup> This is what allows me to formulate the Four Noble Truths without departing from the Buddhist spirit, while remaining in tune with the Christian spirit.<sup>434</sup>

However, from the point of view of philosophical coherence, it seems evident that Buddha could not speak of the end of suffering if everything was inescapably suffering—at the risk of falling into a nihilism that the Buddha rejects. Moreover, in such a case, we could not speak of the *origin* of suffering,<sup>435</sup> otherwise suffering would be nonoriginated. The origin of *dukkha* implies that there is at least an *adukkha*, which I venture to interpret as *sukha*.<sup>436</sup> *Sarvam idam duḥkham*. If "all this is suffering," there must be "something" that is not.<sup>437</sup>

### Text

Contemporary men must avoid these two extremes in order to obtain a fully human life and the peace and joy to which they aspire. What are they? One is the search for oneself, egocentrism, the search for pleasure, and the contempt for others—which leads to competition, war, and suffering (steeped in the very same power drive). The other is the alienation from oneself, negative asceticism, and indifference to the world—which leads to self-divinization, the preservation of injustice, and the castration of man (compensated by pride and self-satisfaction). Both these extremes lead to the destruction of man, keeping him from being born to true Life.

The middle way of the Blessed One avoids these two extremes, and it is a personal way, luminous and serene, that can be taken from any wanderer and leads to peace, joy, fulfillment, and wholeness.

And what is, O men, the way that leads to peace, joy, fulfillment, and wholeness?

This, O men, is the way that leads to peace, joy, fulfillment, and wholeness.

<sup>433</sup> AN II.167. See also DN I.123–24, for a similar text.

<sup>434</sup> Similarly, Thomas Aquinas (*De potentia Dei* q.4, a.1) upholds that any scriptural interpretation remaining faithful to the literal meaning is a legitimate interpretation: "omnis veritas quae, salva litterae circumstantia, potest divinae scripturae aptari, est eius sensus."

<sup>435</sup> Falk (1986), p. 383, reasonably argues that "If there is nothing else but *duḥkha* prone to cessation—the question on its arising is manifestly absurd."

<sup>436</sup> On the meaning of *dukkha* (Sanskrit *duḥkha*), see a previous note. There is a Pāli adjective *sukkha* (Vedic *uska*) that means dry. There is also an adjective *sukka* (in Vedic *ukla*) meaning white, brilliant, and even pure, good. Sometimes our *sukha* is also written *sukkha*.

<sup>437</sup> As Kalupahana also argues (1986), p. 326, *sarvam duḥkham*, "all is pain," is already found in YS II.15. Cf. the relevant comments in Hauer (1958, pp. 301–8) and his actual translation: "... ist für den, der die Unterscheidungsschau besitzt, Alles leidvolle Hemmung" [for those possessing discriminating vision, all things are a painful obstacle] (p. 245). He adds that this *Hemmung* (imprisonment, mishap, paralysis, numbing, obstacle) is the "Grundbefindlichkeit des Menschen und der Welt" [original situation of man and the world]. See also Kalupahana (1992), p. 86.

This is *the noble truth of happiness*.<sup>438</sup> When man begins a work, acts or initiates anything, he is aspiring to happiness. The star leading his every action is the brightness of his joy. Life in its deepest experience is pleasure. That is why men live and do not kill themselves.

This, O men, is *the noble truth of the origin of happiness: faith* in the existence and possibility of joy; man comes from happiness, and as he manages to truly live he is happy. The deepest aspiration of man, his existential weight, comes from a center that is pure joy, perfect glory. Men would not move toward happiness if this was not the very center of their life.

This, O men, is *the noble truth of the acquisition of happiness: hope* of reaching it, true aspiration to happiness, making it possible not to be distracted along the way and not forgetting that the way as such for the pilgrim is joyous. Without such hope, man does not drink from the source of living water that quenches his thirst in each moment. Hope is of the invisible in the present, not a dream of the future, and it is the source of confidence in Life.

This, O men, is *the way that leads to the result of happiness: the simple and noble path of love*, of true and authentic love for all beings, without, however, getting lost in any of them. The noble path of love: the total offering of one's self that can have no end because it is inexhaustible. This love opens up to the noble multiple path: right consciousness, pure heart, clear language, sincere behavior, and all those noble means that multisecular human consciousness has recommended since antiquity.

This is the middle way that offers vision and knowledge, that leads to fullness, to the realization of Life.

Until the triple experience of *faith, hope, and love* is purified in the *Four Noble Truths*, the men of this world—with their passions, resentments, constructions, machines, societies, knowledge, and accomplishments—will not reach the awakening that brings peace, joy, and true freedom.

### Corollaries

#### *The Demand for Happiness*

The first difference between our text and the Buddhist position is that the latter focuses its attention on pain, as a characteristic of contingency, whereas we have put the accent on the happiness to which man aspires. The one speaks of *dukkha* and the other of *sukha*. Both, however, are complementary correlatives, as is borne out by the Sanskrit and Pāli texts.<sup>439</sup>

These two viewpoints are, undoubtedly, united by the concrete reality that they question and the trust that a satisfactory answer will be found: in a negative form in one case (to eliminate the suffering inherent in contingency), in a positive form in the other (to attain a joyful reality after having purified the imperfections of contingency). The difference is reflected in the very way we ask the question, which leads us to consider the crucial importance of the question itself, since from it stems the type of answer we shall get. In actual fact, the question

<sup>438</sup> Although we can consider the English words "joy" (from *gaudium*; *goig, joia, joie*), "bliss," "well-being," and also the synonyms "pleasure," "happiness," "mirth," etc., each of these words has a different shade of meaning. Felicity, from the Latin *felix*, means "that bears fruit": fecund, fertile. Cf. *fetus* (fetus), *fela* (breast) [hence breastfeeding]. The Greek *θηλή* would mean "that which gives milk." The possible Indo-European *dhē(i)* or *dhu(i)* would mean to nurse, to suckle. Joy would be that state of well-being that, having nourished us with real life, fecundates our existence, and thus achieves its fullness or realization. Although I have preferred the word "happiness," we might also use the words "mirth," "joy," and so on, to highlight the polysemy of the symbol.

<sup>439</sup> Concerning this issue, see AN III.354; IV.414.

includes ontically its own answer and conditions it to the point that each answer in turn is only the ontological manifestation of the question.

Now, the question of God and His Being, according to the Buddhist perspective, is almost futile since it admits only three types of answers: affirmative, negative, and agnostic. The Buddha warns us, however, that with these three answers we can only exhaust such a question, but certainly not hope to reach "that" which "transcends" our awareness or our ignorance (of it), as well as being or non-being, since this "something" does not allow itself to be contained in the scheme of this or any other question.

Hence the Buddha's intention to "distract" us from the issue of God, to concentrate on the immediate problem of suffering and its elimination. This does not mean either theism nor atheism on his part, nor even agnosticism; this is not the issue, and Siddhārta refuses to allow himself to become entangled in this game. His problem does not derive from a rational elucubration but from an intuition of human existence, in which God is not an object of thought, nor an object of will, much less of preaching or of proclamation.

So Siddhārta has always drastically refused to let himself be duped by the dialectics of his time concerning God, to concentrate directly on the practical level of existence. That is why he prefers to focus on the *dawning awareness* of the issue of suffering and on the need to destroy it, rather than emphasizing the human search for immediate happiness. Māra (the Tempter) says the joy of the father is in his sons, like the herds are the joy of their owner, since man rests in joy and no joy can be had for the one whose life depends on nothing.

To which the Awakened One answers: The suffering of the father is in his sons, like the herds are the suffering of their owner, but suffering does not affect him whose life depends on nothing.<sup>440</sup>

Yet while we are aware that true joy does not consist in fulfilling transitory pleasures, the aspiration to happiness is as human a characteristic as the elimination of suffering, and few religions appear as cheerful, optimistic, and serene as Buddhism, at least in most of its forms.<sup>441</sup>

In fact, the sixth speech of the Buddha to the monk Saccaka, son of the jaina—or as is said elsewhere, son of a jaina woman—seems to lean toward our interpretation. We are talking about the so-called great speech to Saccaka,<sup>442</sup> which may be summarized as follows:

Saccaka is a troublemaker; he wanders about Vesali and tries to confound Gautama. Ānanda sees him coming and tells the Tathāgata. Saccaka begins by saying that some by cultivating the body to the extreme have been lost; others by cultivating the souls to an extreme also suffer and become mad. Not even the care of body and spirit together leads to peace and happiness. So they continue talking. Buddha tells him his experiences and ascetic practices. However, all is suffering.

"Could there be no other way to awakening?" wonders Gautama.

And then he makes the following confession:

<sup>440</sup> SNi I.2 (33 and 34). Cf. UdVag XXI.1: "Henceforth all experiences [*dhamma*] fail to touch me. I have renounced all; I am free of every fear [*bhaya*]" (in Silburn [1955], p. 225). See, as a modern example, the short poem by the Japanese philosopher Nishida (1958) appearing as an epigraph in the English translation of one of his books: "The bottom of my soul has such depth; neither joy nor the waves of sorrow can reach it."

<sup>441</sup> Cf. the various references to *paramarṇi sukham* (supreme happiness) that are found in many texts (see, for example, MN I.94; AN I.136, 294; Dh XV.7–8 [pp.203ff.]), which repeatedly indicate that the elimination of suffering is considered the door automatically opening out upon happiness. See AN III.354, 430. See Pande (1957), p. 480, and other texts we have cited (e.g., DN II.157).

<sup>442</sup> *Mahasaccaka Sutta* (MN I.236–51).



This happened to me, Aggivessana. I remember that when my father tilled the land I was sitting under the shadow of a blossoming apple tree, far from sensual pleasures and also from the coarser states of consciousness; I was in the first stage of meditation, which, also when accompanied by thought and discourse [*dhyaṇa* together with reflection and analysis], is born of solitude and is a joyful and happy state. In this condition I wondered if this could not be a path to awakening. Following then my meditative practice I saw clearly that this truly was a path toward awakening.

Then the following happened to me, Aggivessana: Will I be afraid of this happiness, which is different from sensual pleasure and from the coarser states of consciousness? This happened to me, Aggivessana [the emphasis is meaningful]: I do not fear that happiness that is removed from sensual pleasure and is sufficient to consciousness.

This happened to me, Aggivessana [the text insists]: it is not easy to reach happiness leaving the body exhausted.

He then proceeds to tell how he began to feed himself and his first five followers forsook him. He then entered the first meditation and found it was joyful and happy. Then the second, the third, and the fourth. In all cases, happiness continued without generating attachment in his mind. He thus conquered the three forms of knowledge, in the three traditional eves of the night of his awakening, and the detached and serene joy persisted.

When the Buddha teaches the *dharma*, he keeps this very much in mind, to the point that when asked if Gautama consents to napping during the day, Gautama answers that during the last hot month, coming back from begging, and having eaten, he folds his [outer] clothing with four folds carefully and, fully aware, he lies on his right side.

Saccaka is edified and begs forgiveness for having wanted to insult him or hurt him, and he takes his leave, saying he has to go. "Do what you have to do now," answered the Buddha. Then Saccaka, the son of the jaina, rejoicing for what the Lord had told him, gave thanks and went his way.<sup>443</sup>

If, therefore, in this new formulation of the Discourse of the Four Noble Truths we have dared to change the (mathematical) sign of human search for realization, we do not feel we have strayed very far from the Buddhist spirit, abiding at the same time in a context more suited to our contemporary spirit. Both suffering and joy, in fact, are universal factors, endowed with a dimension of definitiveness, although each of us may have different ideas on happiness and on the practical ways to pursue it.<sup>444</sup>

### *Primordial Joy*

The fact of considering the human condition as based essentially on original purity, where joy rather than suffering is the primordial characteristic, is something that belongs to the different religious traditions of humanity.<sup>445</sup>

<sup>443</sup> It is interesting to observe that, as the classic commentary to the MN II.293 says (as related by Horner [1954–1959], p. 305), Saccaka did not listen further, neither was converted [took refuge]; however, Gautama gave him the *dhamma* for the future. And, in fact, two hundred years after his death, Saccaka "reincarnated" in Sri Lanka and deserved to reach the status of *arhat* (awakened). Let us add that this text has great authority (it is also included in the *Mahāvastu*, as Falk notes [1986, p. 338]) and offers a wonderful comment on the four grades of Buddhist meditation, which were further developed in subsequent Scholastic systematizations.

<sup>444</sup> Cf. the study by Pieper (1957/1).

<sup>445</sup> See an interesting testimonial to this in the numerous papers of the Eleventh International

In this case, suffering is presented as a sort of superstructure that became attached to the human species and from which it should be freed, whereas the ultimate ground of man is joy.<sup>446</sup> So when the Buddha says that the liberation of Man can be obtained by eliminating the superstructure of suffering involved in contingency, although he does not name this liberation "joy," it eventually comes to the same—so much so that later tradition does not hesitate to speak of it.<sup>447</sup> *Nirvāṇa* itself has been called "supreme happiness" (*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukham*).

Health is the greatest treasure. If you consider it sufficient these are the greatest riches; those you can trust are the best parents; *nibbāna* is the supreme happiness.<sup>448</sup>

When joy is seen as an initial state (and not final, as a goal to reach), the method by which it is reached can be only the negative way of divestment. When joy is considered the primordial and natural state of man, there is no need to know what it may be, nor to move toward it, nor to add anything to our condition. All we must "do" is divest ourselves from the superstructures of pain, eliminate all that life has accumulated in the course of existence—in short, destroy contingency so that the initial joy and glory may shine anew without obstacles. To this end, no previous knowledge is necessary in order to choose the right path or the right direction and goal. The path suggested by the Buddha is available to all experiences, because it remains within our limitations—that is, to eliminate suffering and destroy the contingency that we "are," thus making the initial glory shine in all its purity.<sup>449</sup>

The Awakened himself affirms this:

Once Ānanda, the preferred disciple, said to the Master, "Half of the holy life, O Lord, consists in the friendship with beauty, in communion with what is beautiful."

"Nor so, nor so, Ānanda," said the Master. "It is not half of the holy life but all of it."<sup>450</sup>

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Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) held in Claremont, California, September 6–11, 1965. Strictly speaking, the theme of the congress was guilt and purification rites. However, if we need forgiveness it is because a possibility of primordial pureness exists. Cf. *Proceedings IAHR* (1968), vol. 2. Cf. also the antediluvian myth of humankind (Gen 2:8ff.), which is shared, in one form or another, with most of humanity in its varied religions. See Campbell (1949) and M. Fox (1983; 1992). This author's theological struggle to go beyond the doctrine of original sin is well known. According to Fox, the excessive emphasis on original sin is responsible for the Manichean attitude of contemporary Christianity.

<sup>446</sup> The Latin *alacer* (cf. *alacritas*) suggests ardor, liveliness, enthusiasm, zeal, growth, and even strength (*impetu alacri*, ἀλκή, "strength"), and here we use it to translate *sukha*.

<sup>447</sup> See the previously cited text on the words of Indra, who considers the pacification of sorrow as happiness. See also Śāntideva, *Bod VIII.8*: "Moving freely, without attachment, not being bound to anyone, he realized a joy that even Indra did not know how to achieve."

<sup>448</sup> Dh XV.8 (204).

<sup>449</sup> See the monumental work of Balthasar (1961), in which the author emphasizes the importance of this theme in great Western thinkers, and also how it came to be forgotten in scholastic and summarized formulations, although the perspective is different.

<sup>450</sup> SN 5.2.

*Aspiration to Happiness*

Few ideas have contributed more to the misunderstanding of Buddhism in the West as the belief that the Buddha, condemning every desire, has reduced man to a sort of fatalistic Buddhist resignation, a characterization that is so often used for the whole of the East. As I wrote earlier, the word normally translated as "desire" actually means thirst.

A terminological distinction might help us eliminate this misunderstanding. We might, in fact, make a distinction between aspiration and desire.

By *desire* we mean the human thirst that demands something objectified, even vaguely—an object that may be the object of desire, moving our appetite and directing our action toward its realization. Desire is moved by a *télös* of our will, and arises from the projection in the future of what we want in the present.

By *aspiration*, on the other hand, we mean something closer to the *epéxtasis* mentioned earlier. Aspiration is not a movement forward propelled by the attraction of a goal or by an object's quality of being desirable, but by the dynamism moved by inner aspiration, by the very strength of our being—hence the capital importance of a pure heart, for otherwise we would confuse love with lust, to use a traditional Christian language.

The Jewish Bible uses many different words to talk of desire,<sup>451</sup> as does Christian Scripture.<sup>452</sup> Here we find a similar ambivalence regarding desires ranging from good to evil, and the words used also characterize questioning, exploring, developing a passion, will, affection, seeking, finding pleasure, and so on. Coming back to our theme we could summarize it in the following words.

Our existence is steeped in "thirst": thirst as concrete, objectified desire, always unfulfilled for any limited good.<sup>453</sup>

Since the memory of me is sweeter than honey,  
Possessing me sweeter than the honeycomb,  
Those who feed from me will still be hungry  
And those that drink of me will still be thirsty.<sup>454</sup>

Such thirst is forever unfulfilled since, ultimately, nothing can truly quench it, so that it causes the malaise and frustration to which our age is often prone.

There is a second form of thirst that we have called "aspiration," whose stimulation keeps us alive.<sup>455</sup> However, this aspiration also remains unfulfilled as long as we are in this life since desire is infinite and we are finite. This aspiration is part of the path of salvation, to the point that, should it weaken in the process, we could not consider it authentic.<sup>456</sup> Such

<sup>451</sup> *Chemed* (*chamad*, *chemdah*), *avah* (*taavah*, *ta*), *chephets* (*chaphets*), *shaal* (*nishalah*), etc.

<sup>452</sup> Αἰτέω (*èξαιτέω*), ἀζιόω, ἐπιποθέω, ἐρωτάω, θέλω, ἐπιθυμέω, etc.

<sup>453</sup> "Quid enim petis amplius quam ut beatus sis?" [What most do you ask for if not happiness?] (Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*).

<sup>454</sup> Sir 24:19–21.

<sup>455</sup> Cf. Augustine's *Tractatus in Epistulam Ioannis*, tract. 4 (PL 35:2008): "Tota vita Christiani boni sanctum desiderium est" [The Christian life is nothing but a holy desire]. Cf. also Deut 9:23 according to the Vulgate.

<sup>456</sup> Cf. the traditional Christian criterion of discrimination of desires: "Sancta enim desideria . . . dilatione crescunt. Si autem dilatione deficiunt, desideria non fuerunt" [Indeed, holy desires . . . mature in the waiting. If they diminish in the waiting, they have not been desires] (Gregory the Great,

aspiration is the first condition for the unfolding of hope. We could define it as an aspiration for the infinite.<sup>457</sup>

Strictly speaking, this "desire" is to be considered positively. It is aspiration that belongs to liberation, to fullness. It is a goad toward perfection that has no other object as a point of reference.<sup>458</sup> It is the aspiration of human finiteness for the infinite.<sup>459</sup> Such aspiration, belonging as it does to contingency, makes us touch that tangent point that we also "are" and forces us to constantly move beyond ourselves, toward our wholeness. That is why the thirst for justice will make us blessed, because such justice cannot be fulfilled in this world.<sup>460</sup>

Is this what the Buddha implies when he affirms repeatedly that we must seek our salvation with diligence? Or might it be that any thirst, even the supposedly most perfect—such as the desire for one's own salvation—is to be considered impure and unable to lead us to liberation?<sup>461</sup> The Buddha seeks to extinguish desire itself, both for the source and for any living water. He teaches us that any thirst produces malaise because it constantly deceives us through the object it wears, and that even the thirst for living water may only prolong the malaise, internalizing it, and becoming an obstacle to the unconditioned satisfaction of any thirst.<sup>462</sup> Moreover, the Master of Nazareth himself realized the inconsequence of an unquenchable thirst and talked of its quenching.<sup>463</sup> Tradition speaks of man himself turning into a source.<sup>464</sup>

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*Homiliae in Evangelia* II.25 [PL 76:1190]). Cf. also the desire of deliverance (the *mumukṣutva*) in the Vedānta, e.g., Śaṅkara, Viveka, passim.

<sup>457</sup> See the very Christian and purely Greek passage in St. Gregory of Nyssa, *In canticum canticorum* XI [PG 44:1000a], where we read that the desire to see is insatiable because whatever is seen is constantly more divine (θειότερον) and greater than what is hoped for.

<sup>458</sup> Cf. the *Brahma-jijñāsa* or desire to know *brahman* in the Hindu tradition. Cf. BS I.1.1 and the commentaries by the various schools.

<sup>459</sup> Cf. the intuition of Meister Eckhart, who considers the creature as a passive effect of the divine causality, and, accordingly, constitutively thirsting: "Passivum semper sitit et bibendo semper sicit activum suum" (What is passive, ever thirsts, and when it drinks it thirsts for its own active principle). Eckhart comments on the text of Sir 24:21, "Those that thirst after me will still be athirst," keeping in mind Jn 4:14; 6:35, etc., which say the opposite. *Liber Parabolarum Genesis* I.1 (LW, p. 1:494, §25). Beings are thirsty because they are creatures, and creation is not an act of the past but the continuing conservation of existence. Commenting on the Sirach text, Eckhart says elsewhere, "Dicamus quod ad significandum hanc veritatem analogiae rerum omnium ad ipsum deum dictum est optime 'qui edunt me, adhuc esuriunt': 'edunt,' quia sunt; 'esuriunt,' quia ab alio sunt" [Let us stress that, in order to signify this truth of the analogy of all things with God, it is rightly said, "Those who eat of me will hunger still." "Eat," because they are; "will hunger," because they are from another] (Lossky [1960], p. 293). *Being* means "eating," "participating," "being created," "not yet being." It is simply *thirst* for the wellspring of Being.

<sup>460</sup> Cf. Mt 5:6, etc.

<sup>461</sup> "Buddhahood is the state in which all our clinging to things is overcome, and there must be indifference to, or detachment from, even the ideal goal of becoming Buddha" (Tanabe, as cited in Takeuchi [1966], p. 961).

<sup>462</sup> To avoid confusion, we might distinguish between the primordial aspiration for salvation (the Hindu *mumukṣutva*) and desires that are always an obstacle.

<sup>463</sup> See Jn 6:35; 7:37; Rev 7:16; 21:6; Mt 5:6; Ps 61:3; 62:2; etc.

<sup>464</sup> See the documents and commentary (all too often overlooked) described in H. Rahner (1964), pp. 175–235 (Bibliography).

*The Loss of Contingency*

The adventure of happiness is a mortal adventure. Our whole life is at stake. The Buddha is explicit on this and talks of the elimination of suffering as the elimination of all that is most strictly bound to human creatureliness. To the Buddha, salvation is obtained—and the word is not adequate since the issue at stake is not “obtaining” but “forsaking”—forsaking one’s life totally, stepping beyond time and space, breaking cosmological bonds, overcoming *saṃsāra*, transcending creatureliness and contingency. Nothing, absolutely nothing of all that belongs to this world can claim, by definition, to be on the other shore, on the side of the Absolute, of the intemporal, of *nirvāṇa*. Nobody can really say that he has reached *nirvāṇa*, because the one who has finally gone beyond existence has ceased to be.<sup>465</sup> Contingency cannot be preserved (and who would be preserving it?), affirming at the same time that the Absolute is the ultimate aim of the creature. Once again, *advaita* would be the answer.

Likewise, according to medieval Scholasticism, creation is neither change nor movement, since from nothingness to being there is no transit or passage. Not even the “de-creation” of *nirvāṇa* represents a transit or a passage, because in the case of creation we do not have the first comparative term, and in the case of *nirvāṇa* we lack the second.

Christ was just as explicit, with His repeated exhortation to lose one’s life.<sup>466</sup> The adventure of life is a mortal adventure, and it is certain that the evangelical passages concerning death are followed by the promise of resurrection. If one does not die, no resurrection is possible. These are the “lukewarm” condemned by the evangelist.<sup>467</sup> The Buddha’s message reminds us that the Evangelical exhortations highlight the first part of the message rather than the second (reward or resurrection), which does not depend upon our will.

We must, therefore, be willing to give up contingency—to ultimately give up being, in all its acceptations. In God there is no room for a non-God.<sup>468</sup> On the other hand, in *bhakti* spirituality also, in spite of a few discordant voices, there is no possible separation; there is no room for two in the final embrace. In love, in joy, in an embrace, in union, in consummation there is no room for two. They were two in order to arrive at being one, or rather non-two. Once the reign of dissimilarity is abolished, *regnum dissimilitudinis* (to use the beautiful Western medieval expression), any idea of differentiation, also disappears.<sup>469</sup> And, obviously, without dissimilarity there is neither contingency nor creation. Creation “has been,” “was,” but once the goal has been reached, the scar of temporality is totally healed.<sup>470</sup>

This also means that the contemporary world, though wishing to recognize joy as the ultimate term of the human adventure, is in fact realizing that there cannot be perfect happiness until there are contingent remains to be burned, creatural residues to be consumed. The human individual can be compared, in fact, to a drop of water among so many other drops (to cite an example dear to the Upaniṣadic tradition<sup>471</sup>) which, at the end of its existence, enters the sea of Divinity.<sup>472</sup> But the fear of losing one’s “own” individuality has often

<sup>465</sup> “Le *nirvāṇa* est, mais le sujet du *nirvāṇa* n’est point” [*nirvāṇa* exists, but the subject of *nirvāṇa* by no means exists] is the translation by Lamotte (1958).

<sup>466</sup> Cf. Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23.

<sup>467</sup> Rev 3:15–16.

<sup>468</sup> Cf. “Et sic creatura in Deo est ipsa essentia divina” [And thus the creature in God is the divine essence itself] (Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia* q.3, a.16, ad 24).

<sup>469</sup> Cf 1 Cor 15:28.

<sup>470</sup> See Panikkar (1961/6), where these same themes are developed in a Christian perspective.

<sup>471</sup> Concerning the drop of water, see the traditional passages, MundU III.2.8; BS I.4.21. See also KathU IV.14–15 and its Buddhist traits as studied by Glasenapp (1962/2).

<sup>472</sup> Cf. Panikkar (1981/IV).

led philosophy and Christian theology to defend the idea of individual survival.

It all depends on where we put value, whether in the finite or the infinite.<sup>473</sup> In the former case, that is, if for us the value of human "personality" lies in the superficial tension, what is limited, the limitation of water, which is the drop, then it is obvious that it is lost once it is immersed in the sea of the Divine, however you may wish to interpret the name. If, on the contrary, value lies in what constitutes the very essence of personality—that is, in its being an image, a spark, a participation in the Whole (divine to some, to others human and social, and to others yet of the collective unconscious; the Buddha, meanwhile, would say in nothing); if, in short, its essence is "water" and not its delimitation in a drop, then when this drop reaches the sea, one cannot certainly say that it will cease being water, neither that it will be lost. What are we, the *drop* of water or the *water of the drop*? Mysticism talks of emptying ourselves, of the extinction of our ego as a essential condition for reaching the Absolute, God, the other shore, the *nirvāṇa*.

### *The Communal Aspect*

These noble truths would degenerate into ugly lies if we were to interpret them in a merely individualistic sense. Spiritual selfishness is the danger of mysticism when it focuses on a narcissistic abstraction that is the very negation of its aspiration. In simpler words, if the goal of the spiritual man is his own extinction, should he not also wish that all men turn into "nothing"? If man and his world in general are worthless, why care about them? If the ideal of Man is being a saint (in the etymological sense of the word: "separated"), *arhat* (the one who retires from the world's struggle), *śamnyasin* (the one who has renounced) . . .<sup>474</sup> will not the apostles of suffering humanity be right in considering such an attitude "selfish" and the philosophy upholding it inhuman?

On the other hand, can the true representatives of many traditions really be accused of selfishness? Certainly not. The gospel of the Master of Nazareth is a message of service and love for one's neighbor.<sup>475</sup> The parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>476</sup> continues to represent the most genuine Christian spirit. In this parable, the Master does not speculate philosophically on the character of God or man, but with a Buddhist spirit offers a practical example of behavior toward humanity in need.<sup>477</sup> Moreover, since its origins the whole Christian

<sup>473</sup> Elsewhere (cf. Panikkar [1978/XXVI, p. v]), we have sought to show that in the West the paradigm of perfection is symbolized, from Parmenides onward, by the sphere, round, with no holes, perfect, and when all is said and done, limited, whereas in India the idea of perfection is represented by the points, having no dimensions, qualities, or other determinations, infinite. On this, cf. propositions II and XVIII of *Liber XXIV philosophorum*, cited above: "Deus est sphaera infinita, cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam," and "Deus est sphaera, cuius tot sunt circumferentiae, quot sunt puncta" [God is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere] and [God is a sphere with as many circumferences as there are points].

<sup>474</sup> In a Buddhist context, the ideal of holiness is represented by the *arhat* and the *bodhiyattva*; in Hinduism, by the *jīvanmukta*; and in Christianity, by the saint.

<sup>475</sup> See, e.g., Mt 10:40ff.; 25:31ff.

<sup>476</sup> Lk 10:25–37.

<sup>477</sup> "Tal pregunta, a lo que luego responde el 'vete y haz tu lo mismo,' no responde directamente a la cuestión arriba propuesta por el escriba 'quién es mi prójimo?'" [This question, to which the response is, "Go thou and do likewise," is not a direct answer to the question that the scribe has just asked, "Who is my neighbor?"], write Nacar and Colunga in their commentary to these verses; or again: "Instead of giving a theoretical response to the question he has been asked, Jesus goes directly to the concrete domain of facts," according to the commentary by the Biblical Institute of Rome, *in hoc loco*.

tradition has repeatedly emphasized the exhortations in favor of one's neighbors uttered by the apostles and the Scriptures<sup>478</sup> and never tires of repeating that the two loves (the love of God and the love of one's neighbor) are the same love.<sup>479</sup>

The theory is clear, and in this respect Hinduism is certainly as eloquent as Buddhism.<sup>480</sup> Not only is *mahakaruna* (great compassion) one of the first qualities of the Awakened and especially of the *bodhisattva*—so much so that Mahāyāna Buddhism prefers it even to *nirvāṇa*<sup>481</sup>—but mercy and compassion are two fundamental aspects of Buddhist spirituality, as we can see from the practice of the four spiritual exercises recommended by tradition (*brahma-vihara*), which are composed of benevolence (*metta*), compassion (*karuṇa*), joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*).<sup>482</sup>

Tathāgata himself did not refrain from offering his services to someone suffering. Tradition tells, in fact, that one day the Awakened One passed through one of the monasteries in which monks lived and found one who was lying in his own excrement, victim of a deadly and contagious bowel infection. Śākyamuni washed him with his own hands and took him to his own bed. Then, turning to the monks, he told them,

"Oh *bhikkhu*, you no longer have mother and father that may take care of you; if you do not care one for another who will do so? If any of you wishes to take care of me, let him care for the sick."<sup>483</sup>

The Buddha's action is totally disinterested, not only in its motivation but also toward the ailing monk whom he cured not to heal him (he had already been declared incurable) but only that he might have a better death. The sense of his *karuṇa* must then be found in the overabundance of his state of "grace." When someone has reached the state of "Buddhahood," when he is in perfect peace, free from any desire (even the desire of salvation) and from any emotion, the *karuṇa*, the love for one's neighbor, is a corollary of the very nature of "attainment." From this point of view, the Buddha's *karuṇa* can be compared to the divine theme of creation as a practical "manifestation" of the overabundance of love. The same is true of the attitude of the spiritual man toward his neighbor: it is an overabundant love that is poured on one's neighbors, with no other motivation than wanting their good and easing their pilgrimage on this earth. In it there is no shadow of selfishness, nor of "paternalism," the inevitable shortcomings of any self-aware "good deed."<sup>484</sup>

We report some paragraphs of the well-known *Metta Sutta* of the Pāli canon. As I have

<sup>478</sup> See, e.g., 1 Jn 2:10–14; etc.

<sup>479</sup> See Mt 10:40ff., as well as 1 Jn 3:16; 4:12ff. (esp. v. 20); etc.

<sup>480</sup> Cf. Manu II.161; VI.47–48; MhB XII.3880, 5528; XIII.5571; etc.

<sup>481</sup> Cf. the parable used by Tanabe (the contemporary Japanese philosopher, d. 1962), as reported by Takeuchi (1966). A *bodhisattva*, after a long life, was prepared to join the Buddha and reunite with him. Arriving at the Buddha's dwelling, however, he found it deserted. The Buddha had left his house to return to the world. The *bodhisattva* understands, and also returns to the world to cooperate with the Buddha in the salvation of the cosmos.

<sup>482</sup> See DN II.196; III.220. These four attitudes advocated by the Buddha are usually called *apramāṇacitta*, infinite feelings, because they have a totally universal object, without exceptions or discriminations. Cf. the pertinent comments by Takeuchi (1983), especially ch. 2, pp. 13–47.

<sup>483</sup> *Mahāvagga*, in VP I.301–2, a famous text that is repeatedly quoted. Cf. Gispert-Sauch (1969), pp. 626–27, and references in Lamotte (1958), p. 67; Gupte (1972); etc.

<sup>484</sup> See, for example, Mt 6:3: "When you give alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing."

already mentioned, *metta* (Sanskrit *maitri*, Vedic *maitan*) means goodness, benevolence, love, sympathy, and friendship.<sup>485</sup>

Let all beings be happy! Let them live serenely. May they all be healthy and happy, with no exceptions—whether they be weak or strong, whether they live in the higher spheres of existence or in the middle or lower spheres, whether they be great or small, visible or hidden, near or far, born or still unborn.

After this reference to the traditional cosmovision, the text concentrates on man:

Like a mother defending her creature with her life, so all must show a great and open heart to all beings.<sup>486</sup>

As its famous vow declares, the whole of the *bodhisattva* spirituality consists in renouncing individual liberation to cooperate in the salvation of all living beings: "I accept all creatures as mother, father, brother, sons, and relatives," recites part of its vow.<sup>487</sup>

In a word, one cannot be happy in isolation. Happiness is communal.

### The Silence of God: Prolegomena

As we have seen, three main questions have constantly troubled man since the awakening of his consciousness: the problem of God, the problem of the World, and the problem of Man. Man has tried to give an answer to these three questions according to the cultural context in which he has been steeped, and the various answers may be summarized into three major categories:

1. The position of cosmic trust, rather typical of the East.
2. The critical attitude, typical mostly of the West.
3. The anthropocentric attitude that seems dominant today.

In the first case, the widespread attitude considers that if God and the World have meaning, they have it independently of one's knowledge. This has certainly not determined a renunciation to intellect or philosophy, yet the consequent spiritual attitude tends to set the knowledge of ultimate reality as outside the reach of conscious awareness. This position can be expressed with the classic affirmation, "those who speak do not know and those who know do not speak."<sup>488</sup> There is trust in reality—a trust that is not lacking in the West either.<sup>489</sup>

<sup>485</sup> There is a root *-mid*, which, besides signifying love, denotes the fact of getting fatter, as a sign of happiness and satisfaction.

<sup>486</sup> SNi I.8 (145–50). I have followed Dumoulin (1983, p. 266) in the translation of this text, cited also by Gispert-Sauch (1969, p. 626).

<sup>487</sup> See the voice "*bodhisattva*" in Malakaseri (1961), pp. 3:224–233.

<sup>488</sup> Cf. *Tao Te-Ching*, LV and LXXXI, repeated by Chuang-Tzu, XXII.1. Cf. some characteristic texts: "The *tao* that can be named is not the eternal *tao*" (*Tao Te-Ching*, I); "The *tao* is always nameless. When for the first time attributes were attributed to it, for functional reasons, then it was given a name" (XXXII); see also LVI. "I do not think that I know it well, nor do I think that I know it not. Those among us who know anything (of *brahman*) know it; those who do not know, they know not. Those who do not know it, know it. Those who know it, see it not. It is not understood by those who understand; it is understood by those who do not understand" (KenU II.2–3). Cf., as well, "When, O Lord, did we see you hunger and give you drink?" (Mt 25:37–39).

<sup>489</sup> Cf. the "*altiora te ne quaesieris*" of the Bible (Sir 3:22) ("What is above you do not seek / and do not pursue what is above your strength / Take care of what is at hand / and do not worry about what



In the second case, we are dealing with the opposite attitude: If God and the World have meaning, I am obliged to know such meaning; otherwise I could not say that they do have "meaning" if I am ignorant of it, or else they are reduced to non-sense because they are incomprehensible. Therefore, either God and the World are not real or else they have no meaning. The correlation between thinking and being, in both instances, is almost total. If through thinking I do not reach Being, either my thinking is guilty of weakness, or such Being does not exist. Salvation lies, therefore, in *gnōsis*.

In the third case, if the World and God have meaning, it has been conferred to them by Man. Nothing exists independently of Man, and in fact, God is effectual and effective only for those who believe in Him, whereas He is completely dead for those who do not recognize Him.<sup>490</sup> This attitude, which is not to be necessarily equated with subjectivism, is like an attempt to reorient the center of gravity and it is typical of contemporary man: Man is at the center of the universe.

These three eminently human stances will react in very different ways to the evident silence of God. We only wish to highlight the Buddha's answer for our times.

### *The Originary Silence*

Today it has almost become fashionable to say that "God is silent." However, this proposition has a very different meaning from what religions traditionally implied when they spoke of the silence of God. Traditionally, God is silence because He is a hidden God<sup>491</sup> who likes to be surrounded by darkness.<sup>492</sup> Silence, so interpreted, brings out the main characteristic of God: His mystery. A God who would not be "mysterious" would ipso facto cease to be God; it would, rather, be a philosophical statement, a goal for thought, at the most a Primal Cause, but not a God in the traditional meaning of the word. Those who have "understood" Him have recognized that only silence can describe Him.<sup>493</sup> God does not allow Himself to be expressed<sup>494</sup>—only silence is His best praise.<sup>495</sup> Intellect must,

you cannot know," is Nācar-Colunga's commentary in the Spanish edition), and Goethe's saying, "Wie? Wann? und Wo? Die Götter bleiben stumm! / Du halte dich ans Weil und frage nicht Warum?" [How? When? Where? The Gods keep silence! / Take hold of what is and do not ask: wherefore?] (*Spruchsammlung* of 1815, quoted and commented on by Heidegger [1971], pp. 206ff., in his conference of 1956).

<sup>490</sup> See a single example: "If he faces the truth without panic he will recognize that there is no meaning to life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers, by living productively" (Fromm [1947], p. 45), although the author's context is different.

<sup>491</sup> Isa 45:15.

<sup>492</sup> Cf. 1 Kings 8:12, where it is asserted that God dwells in darkness. See also Ps 17 (18):12; 96 (97):2; etc. See also JaimB III.20.1, which speaks of the lair in which the divinity is hidden; or again, SU I.1.3, where we read that the power of the divinity is hidden in its qualities (*guṇas*), etc.

<sup>493</sup> Cf. the impressive testimony of the Upaniṣad that was significantly lost and to which Śaṅkaracarya refers when he says that Bāṣkali, on being questioned by Bhadva concerning the nature of the *brahman*, kept silent. When questioned a third time, he decided to reply, lest he trouble his disciple any further, and told him that he had already replied, but that the other had not understood: *upaśanto 'yam ātma* [the ātman is silence]. See BSBh III.2.17.

<sup>494</sup> See Pande (1957), p. 294, who, on silence as the most eloquent expression of the ultimate reality, offers the following citations of the *Acyutagranthamala* edition of the SB: I.162–63; I.3, 28, 53, 624.

<sup>495</sup> Tibi silet laus [Praise to thee keeps silence] is Jerome's translation of Ps 61:2 (PL 28:1174). Cf. Augustine (*Confessiones* IX.25) "sileant . . . et ipsi sibi anima sileant" [They are silent . . . and the very soul keeps its silence] (book 9, chap. 25). "Et silui a bonis" [And I kept silence even about good],

in any event, be quiet when faced with the divine "Mystery" and honor Him with silence, because any expression the human mind may contrive is not adequate to express Him.<sup>496</sup>

One of the most important hymns of the Rig Veda, the *Nasadiya Sukta*, begins by saying, "In the beginning there was neither Being nor Non-being,"<sup>497</sup> a sentence that left a profound echo in later tradition.<sup>498</sup> Silence has neither being nor non-being.<sup>499</sup> It was out of this silence that the Word burst forth:

In the beginning (*agre*), there was Prajapati alone; His Word (*vac*) was with Him; the Word was His second. Prajapati began to contemplate: I want to utter this Word, and she will produce all this (the world). Then He uttered the Word and she produced all this (the world).<sup>500</sup>

Later on, Upaniṣadic philosophy came to differentiate a *brahman* that is sound, word (*śabda Brahman*) from another that is the supreme *brahman* (*param brahman*), absolute, unmanifested, "silent," completely without noise or sound,<sup>501</sup> and equally "void of being."<sup>502</sup>

Christian theology with its own expressions comes to similar conclusions. The very concept of Trinity is, in some ways, an attempt at expressing the same intuition—that is, that what is, what can be contacted and what can, so to speak, be uttered, is the Logos, not the Father. The Christ is the Logos proceeding from Silence,<sup>503</sup> and it has been possible to interpret his birth, defined traditionally *ex Maria Virgine*, also as coming forth from Silence.<sup>504</sup> The Father is Silence par excellence. No one has ever seen Him,<sup>505</sup> and His Word is no longer the Father but the Logos, the Word, the Second Person, his Son,<sup>506</sup> who has

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says the Vulgate, Ps 38:3; "bono carens" [lacking goodness], says the Nova Versio. Whole volumes of bibliography could be cited from most spiritual traditions. "Keeping silence" is a fundamental ascetic and mystic quality. For examples, see Bruneau (1973); Baldini (1986); de Smedt (1986); etc.

<sup>496</sup> "Deus honoratur silentio, non quod de ipso nihil dicamus vel inquiramus, sed quia intelligimus nos ab eius cognitione fecisse" [God is honored by silence, not because nothing can be said or sought of God, but because we understand that God has made us by his knowledge] (Thomas Aquinas, *In Boeth. de Trinitate*, poem., q.2. a.1).

<sup>497</sup> RV X.129.1a.

<sup>498</sup> See also the famous verse from the *Gita* XIII.12: "*Anadimat param brahmā / na sat tan nasat ucyate*" [Without beginning, the primordial *Brahman* / cannot be called either being or non-being]. Cf. XI.37, etc.

<sup>499</sup> Cf. KenU I.3; SU IV.18; VI.19; etc.

<sup>500</sup> PVB XX.14.2.

<sup>501</sup> Cf. MaitU VI.22.

<sup>502</sup> Cf. *Niḥśabdah unya bhūtaḥ*, *ibid*.

<sup>503</sup> Christ "qui est Verbum eius e silencio progressum" [who is His Word proceeding from silence], says Ignatius of Antioch, *I Epistola ad Magnesios* VIII.2 (PG 5:669).

<sup>504</sup> "... religiosum silentium virginis ... circa secretum Dei" [the religious silence of the virgin Mary ... concerning God's secret], says Rupert, *In Canticum* I (PL 168:844). She is "Verbi silentis muta mater" [the mute mother of the silent Word], according to the Santeuil's hymn for purification cited by Lubac (1953), p. 298.

<sup>505</sup> Cf. Jn 6:46; 14:8ff. But he has been "heard," and the *śruti* bears witness to this.

<sup>506</sup> The same Logos in the bosom of divinity is silent: "Et nota quod aquae illae perfectissime et propriissime benedicunt verbum dei, in quo in silentio sine verbo exteriori et super tempus laudant et benedicunt semper verbum, quod est in silentio paterni intellectus, verbum sine verbo aut potius super omne verbum" [And note that those waters bless most perfectly and appropriately the Word of God, by which, in silence, without exterior word and above time, they ever praise and bless the Word that,

come to give voice and visible form to the "silent Mystery of Eternity."<sup>507</sup>

It is evident that Buddhism does not feel the need to explain why God does not answer. It will simply tell us that reality is silent. The Word arises from the Beginning but is distinct from the Beginning.

### *The Clamor of the World*

Quite different is the feeling of modern man when facing silence. A God that is silent inasmuch as He is mysterious no longer "speaks" to him. Since the advent of the predominant scientific attitude, modern man accepts as true only what he can verify rationally, and he has virtually erased from his horizon the word "mystery." In reality, however, he is still terrified by Mystery and attempts to control it by explaining it as best he can. Modern man would like to convert everything into a Word he can hear and communicate, and the fact that God is not in tune with him causes him to be perplexed, skeptical, and dismayed.<sup>508</sup> So he labors to explain rationally the silence of God by reducing it to the reassuring statement that nothing may surprise man with a word that is unheard and unknown.<sup>509</sup> Religion, then, is only seen as a way to maintain simple people in a state of delusion and to keep them away from the only thing important for improving their well-being, that is, their awareness, meant as political awareness.

This attitude is gradually changing, thanks not so much to the philosophers' thinking as to the scientists' calculations and the efforts of those who do not separate justice from justification, *samsāra* from *nirvāṇa*. Contemporary science is now confronting its own limitations and still has to struggle with mystery.

Yet, in spite of all the different explanations and justifications aimed at removing the fear once generated by the silence of the hidden God, modern man has not managed to remove the adverse psychological effect of silence.<sup>510</sup> Silence surrounds him and terrifies him more than ever. Now that he has expelled the figure of the mysterious God that dismayed him with its unfathomable silence, modern man sees himself surrounded by an absolute silence that lies beyond any possibility of redemption. It is the silence of absence, more terrible and terrifying.<sup>511</sup> He can no longer exorcise such absence by getting in tune with the Silent One; therefore he is oppressed by the silence of the world, tortured by his own silence that he can

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in the silence of the Father's Intellect, is Verb without word, or better, above and beyond any word] (Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Liber Genesis* 1.6 [LW 1.239, §77]).

<sup>507</sup> Rom 16:25. *Κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν μυστηρίου ἡνὼς αἰωνίοις σσιγημένον*. The six words of the original text are almost untranslatable: [according to the revelation of the mystery that had remained hidden since eternity], an idea that constitutes the main thread of Pauline theology on the mystery hidden from the beginning of times. See also BU VI.3.12; MundU VI.29; BG IV.3; XVIII.67; etc.

<sup>508</sup> See Beckett's famous drama *Waiting for Godot* (1952).

<sup>509</sup> Cf. the Upaniṣadic image of the human and divine fear of solitude in BU 1.4.1–2: "In the beginning this 'I' existed alone, in the form of a person. It reflected, and saw nothing beyond this 'I' . . . It was afraid. This is why people fear when they are alone. Then it thought, 'Nothing exists apart from Myself. Of what should I be afraid?' . . . After all, it is only from something other that fear arises." See in Panikkar (1993/XXXII) the chapter "Man and His Fear."

<sup>510</sup> Cf. the Hebrew and Christian scriptural insistence on the expression *timor Dei*, inseparable from the God considered hidden and shadowy. See Ps 18:10; 110:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10; 14:27; Sir 1:11; 19:18; etc. See Delumeau (1978) for the interpretation of these and other texts.

<sup>511</sup> "The absurd arises from the confrontation between need and the irrational silence of the world" (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*).

no longer bear, disoriented by society's silence.<sup>512</sup> The silence of infinite spaces terrifies him.<sup>513</sup>

*Sedatephobia*, the fear of silence, is one of the diseases of contemporary man. Silence no longer scares him because of the fear that a God may punish him, but because it reveals the absence of God. Considering that he is without God—a God to be feared but also to be consulted with, to whom destiny (to which He gave meaning) may be committed—and without such support (uncomfortable, perhaps, but also safe), man feels helpless and lonely, and discovers the terrible weight of freedom deprived of responsibility. The anguish but also the boredom of modern man is a consequence of this.<sup>514</sup> Solitude, in other words, as an alternative to the fear engendered by the vertigo of Nothingness, offers only the boredom derived by the impossibility of fellowship.<sup>515</sup> This is, perhaps, why modern man can no longer bear either solitude or silence. In the immense loneliness to which man is forced by frantic lifestyles, progress, and even contemporary architecture,<sup>516</sup> modern man seeks spasmodically the crowds and strives to bury his dismay in noises of all sorts.<sup>517</sup> Space has ceased to be sacred, and with it also, the human habitat.<sup>518</sup>

Silence and solitude go together; but machines and isolation are also well matched. Everyone has his own car and washing machine, his radio, his television, and his mobile phone. The din of discos at least makes it possible to communicate without words. It is not my intention, however, to criticize modernity or make an apology for bygone days.<sup>519</sup>

The Buddha exhorts us to silence. The tradition says that the Blessed One, passing one day near a group of monks, who, distracted, were chatting about this and that, paused and told them,

"When the begging monks (*bhikkhu*) gather, they must do one of two things: either talk of the *dharma* or keep noble silence."<sup>520</sup>

<sup>512</sup> The works of Kafka bear witness to this.

<sup>513</sup> Cf. "Le silence de ces espaces infinis m'effraie" [The silence of the sidereal spaces terrifies me] (Pascal, *Pensées* [Brunschvicg, n. 206], in *Œuvres complètes*, p. 1113n91), although Pascal himself had also written, "En amour un silence vaut mieux qu'un langage" [In love, silence is worth more than discourse] (*Œuvres complètes*, p. 544). Silence without love terrifies. It is difficult to love Newton's space (although Pascal was nineteen years his elder and already dead when Newton published his *Principles* in 1687) and also Einstein's! The rejection of pantheism has determined the contrary effect. One extreme does not justify the other.

<sup>514</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre would be a typical example of this mentality. His message would see man "alone, aimlessly wandering through this monstrous silence, free and alone, without help and without excuses, condemned to decide, without support of any kind, condemned forever to be free" (quoted by Friedman [1963], p. 479). A God who deprived man of freedom would certainly not be divine.

<sup>515</sup> See the text of BU I.4.1–2, which continues as follows: "... [however,] he was not happy [or, he felt bored] and this is why a person is not happy when alone" (I.4.3). See Panikkar (1983/XXVII), pp. 65–95. Consider also the anguish of long silences and the uselessness of words, both employed by contemporary theatre to convey lack of communication—e.g., in the works of Ionesco and Campanile.

<sup>516</sup> In spite of being so often built one above the other, contemporary homes do not favor harmonious relationships in the neighborhood.

<sup>517</sup> Consider the manic use of radio, and the hyperbolic success of television.

<sup>518</sup> See the lengthy and enlightening study by Snodgrass (1990), the subtitle of which reads, *Studies in the Stellar and Temporal Symbolism of Traditional Buildings*.

<sup>519</sup> See the remarkable study by Zucal (1989) and in general the two volumes by Baldini and Zucal (1989).

<sup>520</sup> MN I.161, previously cited.

Physical silence is the first step toward the understanding of cosmic silence. It is fitting that Candrakīrti, as a good disciple of the Awakened One, could say, "the most noble of truths is silence."<sup>521</sup> Silence is the foundation of his whole message, from the silence of meditation to the silence of *nirvāṇa*. This does not alter the fact that silence is difficult to bear and that human nature seeks to fill with words the terrible emptiness caused by Silence. Regarding this, Candrakīrti himself cites a passage from the *Aryatathagataguhyā*:

The night in which, O Śāntamati, the Buddha reached supreme awakening, the night in which he was about to pass into the final *nirvāṇa*, on that occasion the Buddha did not pronounce even a syllable; He did not speak, he does not speak, he shall not speak. However, since living beings, according to the intensity of their fervour (*yathādbhimuktauḥ*), appear with different characteristics and different aims, they imagine that the Buddha has proffered a great variety of discourses on different occasions. At different times they happened to say that the Buddha teaches us on this or that matter or that we hear him teach us some doctrine. In truth, the Buddha does not care about any mental construction, neither about conceptual differences. O Śāntamati, the Buddha is opposed to any complexity (plurality) originated by our mental habits.<sup>522</sup>

### Human Silence

Another kind of silence is what has inspired this study: the philosophical silence on the great questions that nag men and, especially, the silence regarding God. The Buddha is silent with regard to God, and as we have said, his silence shows us that, ultimately, there is nothing to say about God, because God is, in fact, this "nothing." In other words, divine silence corresponds to His lack of being. And it is perhaps this "nothing" that presents itself to the dismayed minds of those modern men who, having wished to be freed from God's paternalism, have denied Him any reality and have fallen into the void.<sup>523</sup> However, the Buddha assures us that there is Nothing to fear and that the dizzy sensations of plunging into a metaphysical Void, terrifying as they may be, are a hallucination of the mind. One must prepare gradually, however, for such a blind leap, and reach silence simply through silence.<sup>524</sup>

As the Buddha teaches us, we cannot speak of silence, and if I have chosen to do so here in order to somehow share something about it, I am aware that what I am trying to transmit can be only a matter of inner experience, through a meditation capable of silencing the tumult of thoughts.<sup>525</sup> Gautama Siddhārtha himself, in fact, renounced the *mahāparinirvāṇa*—silence itself—in order to save men and set the wheel of wisdom in motion also through words.

<sup>521</sup> *Paramartha by aṣṭaṅgaṃ tuṣṭim bhavaḥ*, MKV LVIII.8.

<sup>522</sup> Candrakīrti's comment on chapter 25 of the *Treatise on Relativity* XI (539, 3ff.), as quoted by Stcherbatsky (1968), p. 220.

<sup>523</sup> See, on this same experience, Vesci (1978/1) and Nishitani (1986).

<sup>524</sup> Cf. "When you can say nothing more about Him, only then shall you see Him, for the knowledge of God is divine silence, and the quiescence of all our sensations" (Hermes Trimegistus, *Corpus hermeticum* X.5). See also, "Thou art inexpressible, ineffable, and only with silence canst Thou be embraced (comprehended); receive the pure sacrifices that to thee are devoted, offered with words ..." (ibid., I.31).

<sup>525</sup> See also the triple dimension of the human discovery of the reality of God, in a text that would deserve to be cited in its entirety: "To the great Moses the divine epiphany occurred in a first moment by way of light; then [God] spoke (διαλεγέται) to him in the cloud; and finally, when he became higher and more perfect, Moses saw (βλέπει) God in the dark" (Gregory of Nyssa, *In canticum canticorum* XI [PG 44:1000c]).

Perhaps the best attitude, then, is to use the word knowing that it comes out of silence and that from silence itself it takes its meaning and comprehensibility.<sup>526</sup> In such case, the word is fecundated by silence.<sup>527</sup>

Let us now attempt to organize this meditation on the silence of God according to three different orientations relating to

- Man
- God
- Both

### *Divine Silence in Man*

It has probably become commonplace to say that God speaks no longer, that He is not being heard by man, that He has disappeared. But why so many disappointments?<sup>528</sup> Do we expect God to fix social evils, obvious injustice, or to avenge the offenses we have suffered? What kind of God would He then be? Again, He would be a God prisoner of human whims, and responsible for the evil actions of men.<sup>529</sup> In the words of the Buddha,

"Then [if God were reduced to human assumptions] men would be criminals; thieves; libertines; liars; prey to lust, envy, and error, and all of this they would attribute to the 'creative will of God.'"<sup>530</sup>

<sup>526</sup> "Quasi enim quoddam nutrimentum verbi est censura silentii" [Indeed, the discipline of silence is as it were a nourishment of the word], says Gregory the Great in *Homiliae in Ezechielem* I.11.16 (PL 76:907). This text (known as *censura silentii nutritura est verbi*) is quoted in the classical thirteenth-century guide of hermit women, the Anachorets' Rule, known also as the *Ancrene Wisse* or *Ancrene Riwele*, along with many other scriptural, Patristic, and ancient texts (e.g., Seneca) on guarding the senses and, especially, the tongue. Cf. Salu (1955, p. 32) and, more recently, Savage and Watson (1991, p. 75). For the Buddhist basics on the guarding of the senses (*indriyesu guttadvara*), cf. the convincing arguments of Takeuchi (1983, pp. 27ff.). "To withdraw from the senses does not therefore mean that one shuts out objects. . . . It is a question of rising above the dichotomy between subject and object . . ." (ibid., p. 33; compare Dh III.33–43).

<sup>527</sup> "Das höchste denkerische Sagen besteht darin, im Sagen das eigentlich zu Sagende nicht einfach zu verschweigen, sondern es so zu sagen, dass es im Nichtsagen genannt wird: das Sagen des Denkens ist ein Erschweigen. Dieses Sagen entspricht auch dem tiefsten Wesen der Sprache, die ihren Ursprung im Schweigen hat" [The most complete and thoughtful telling does not consist simply in keeping silence over what should be properly said, but in saying it in such a way that it may be said without having to say it. The telling of thought is rooted in an act of silence. To such telling corresponds the deepest essence of language which has its roots in silence] (Heidegger [1961], p. 1:471).

<sup>528</sup> Cf. José Ortega y Gasset, Martin Buber, Jean Leclercq, and others.

<sup>529</sup> It is to be noted, however, that, although official philosophy and theology continue to speak of the eclipse of God, and the secularized world complains that God "does not speak," in the popular world there are at least as many "seers" who claim to have visions of God or the Virgin, or who have "heard" their words or messages. See Ferrarotti (1978) and the unlikely Pascual (1976). For a study of the contemporary scene, see Castelli (1974). See also the studies on the "apparitions" at Garabandal (Spain), Medjugorje (Yugoslavia), and elsewhere. It would be even easier to make examples with reference to the religious popular world of India, where hyperophanies and theophanies are a daily matter.

<sup>530</sup> See the same concern in Plutarch, *De Superstitione* 10: "Is not he who believes that the gods do not exist perhaps more religious than he who saddles them with unseemly behavior?" Cited by

God, in other words, would be seen as the advocate of man's individual and collective egotism.<sup>531</sup> This is the God of armies, generally those of the winners. In reality, man refuses to hear, and to justify himself he tries to convince himself that God does not speak, or even that He does not exist. When modern man declares that God has disappeared, he reveals an anthropocentric conception of the problem of God. Man speaks of the disappearance of God when he becomes opaque to himself.

Strictly speaking, the silence of God means, first of all, that the claim to total intellection must be left behind. One could say that, since God broke silence at the beginning of time, the only thing He has sufficiently uttered is His Logos.<sup>532</sup> We can often only be understood, in fact, as God's eclipse in action.

Mystical Christian tradition affirms that God pronounced one Word only, but the sociological needs of Christianity have transformed Christian "revelation" in a river of words. When these words have become eroded by time, many Christians, no longer used to silence, either ask for new divine words or give up. Some even lament that in Jesus's day and at the beginning of creation there were no video or photo cameras.

The problem must be formulated anew, forsaking anthropocentrism and bringing about a necessary and vital conversion. It must be recognized that God and man cannot be separated so drastically. As long as there is separation, sooner or later one of the two will try to substantialize it, and history teaches us that it all ends with the erasure of one of the two elements of the dichotomy. For a certain form of mysticism, man is meant to disappear, but since man is the most immediate reality for man himself, in the long run it is God that is bound to disappear. However, as we have seen, the disappearance of God automatically brings with it the disappearance of Man.

Religions (whether you accept or not the etymology of *religare*) have always tried to bridge the gap between God and the World (and especially between God and Man) by preserving the "religation," binding the two together. In Christianity the presence of the Logos in the Trinity and His divinization represent an attempt to solve the dilemma by keeping in the very bosom of God the identity and the distinction between Father and Son, the head of the mystic Body and of the cosmic Christ.<sup>533</sup>

The Son, as Logos, is the breach in the silence of the Father—his expression, both identical to Him and, at the same time, infinitely far, as the originated can be from the originator. In this perspective, the human person is only an accent in this total Word, a particular sound, a projection of God in time and space, an apprentice of God. Man is no longer a divine fall and an inner contradiction when he wants to disown his own nature as pilgrim in pursuit of the fullness of the Word, of the complete Sound. In other words, the individual has a

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Kristensen (1960), p. 250.

<sup>531</sup> See Lk 12:14, where Christ is reported to have refused to be drawn into such a game: "Who made me a judge and divider over you?"

<sup>532</sup> See an African myth, in which the "breach" occurs in the opposite direction; it was silence that injected itself into primordial sound. In the beginning was only Sound, a continuous, and hence unseizable and incomprehensible sound. Then sound was broken (this also is a version of the myth of a primordial "fall"), and from this fracture, language was born, and with language, civilization. And surely the articulation of a sentence, and its comprehensibility through its division into words, depends on the silence interrupting the continuity of sound.

<sup>533</sup> The problem of analogy, and the way it was developed by Christian Scholasticism in its most fertile age (and not as certain modern critics have wished to understand and criticize it), represents one of the finest attempts of the Western mind to approach the problem that concerns us here, in the attempt to maintain the due distance and distinction between Creator and creature.

part in God through his participation in the Logos and, by reversing the way he normally addresses God (as Thou), becomes himself the *thou* of God. In this theological description, God is the only possible *I* and the creature is only the *thou*; so the one praying says, "I am thine, or thy I,"<sup>534</sup> and the philosopher who thinks says, "I am his or his I."<sup>535</sup> Man is the *thou* of God, as just noted.

It is not that today God manifests himself to us in contradiction, rather that we ourselves are this contradiction of God. Human beings, however, cannot admit this conclusion. Man does not wish his annihilation in favor of the *I* of God. This is why atheism accepts no compromises. In the diatribe between a transcendent God and an immanent Humanity, the atheist understands the danger of his own annihilation and denies God before religion can manage to deny him. When, in fact, religion comes to the conclusion that man is "God's contradiction," "the non-God on his way to becoming God," his annihilation as man is almost an accomplished fact.

Yet there is no way out. If God is denied, automatically man is denied, too. The silence of God's absence also ushers in the silent absence of man. The Buddha's message coincides in this with modern philosophies. If we proceed on the path of the negation of God, sooner or later we must come to the negation of man. In other words, to the elimination of God as a support corresponds the elimination of the man who leaned on Him. In fact, the price the Buddhist pays for his serenity in the face of Nothingness is his own life. Without God, man does not exist either, and as we have seen in the preceding pages, the Buddha's message consists precisely in convincing man that he also belongs to a reality in continuous becoming, a reality that has no foundation, no support, no ultimate subject (*sub-jectum*) that can give value to the whole.<sup>536</sup> The only provisional support comes from the three jewels: the *Buddha*, the *dharma*, and the *sangha*, that is, a Symbol, a Behavior, and a Community. Everything is "penultimate" in this world, and nothing can be *said* of what is ultimate without turning it ipso facto into "penultimate." The very concept of something "ultimate," whatever may be the object to which it is applied, is contradictory. When someone asked the master Wen Yi, "What is the first principle?" he answered, "If I told you it would turn into the second principle." Such an "ultimate" dimension is not so much a limit concept in itself but the limit of concept as such.<sup>537</sup> However, even the proposition "Everything is penultimate" implies a contradiction, hence silence: silence itself in God.

### *The Divine Silence in God*

It is important to remember that all we have said belongs to the human intellectual effort to decipher the Mystery (of which God is the symbol). Have we perhaps betrayed the Buddha's message by trying to make it intelligible with words and concepts? Should we not, perhaps, have respected silence without interpreting rationally the meaning of his message? Despising the intellect, however, brings with it the danger of going to the opposite

<sup>534</sup> See above, Augustine's quote.

<sup>535</sup> What I have tried to outline may actually amplify, and partly correct, the thesis that has almost become popular since Buber on the I/Thou relationship. Cf. Buber (1962) and also Ebner (1963–1965).

<sup>536</sup> It is significant that many of those who wish to have Buddhism accepted in the West, not excluding A. K. Coomaraswamy, seek to present it in a positive and *amic* key. Cf. the attitude of many who reject the *anatma-vada* as inauthentic on the grounds that as subjects it would be impossible to give credit to it.

<sup>537</sup> "Verbal expression, so long as it is only a means of communication, serves only to alienate man from the Truth. Not to reveal is nearer to Truth and more loyal to the *dharma*" (Nagao [1955], p. 142).



extreme—irrational pietism. Let me repeat once more that the Buddha declares himself to be as far from one extreme as from the other. Renouncing philosophy, as a vehicle that can lead us to our destination, is an extreme as dangerous as striving to understand everything. *Credo quia absurdum* is the loophole used quite frequently by believers who do not find another way to accept God's reality.

The Tathāgata's middle path is equally distant from the presumptions of an intellect that considers itself strong enough to understand everything (God, Man, World and their relationship) and from the devaluation of an intellect that is deemed incapable of understanding anything. This middle path is not an abdication of reason, since it is reason itself that understands that it cannot find adequate answers to the most urgent questions of life, especially those regarding "God"; it is, rather, a penetration into the very heart of the issues at stake, silencing, appeasing the question at the root.<sup>538</sup> The silence the Buddha desires for his disciples is not a philosophical silence, but a mystical silence, a silent experience. The Buddha's silence is not a defeat but a conquest, an intuition. The Buddha refuses to recognize the *ātman*, to define *nirvāṇa*; he gives no answer to the fourteen fundamental questions that appear crucial for the satisfaction of the intellect, and the only philosophical argument that he agrees to discuss is the one defending the impermanence of all that exists, including man.

Yet God is also silence, and it seems to us that this is what the Buddha wanted to "say." What fits our form of thinking is Being, and we have seen what problems arise from the identification of God with Being. He is God only to creatures; in Himself He is nothing, and certainly not God. As Christian theology would say, the name of God indicates a power, not a property.<sup>539</sup> The Father, if we continue to refer to the Christian language, is not, for what has Being is the Son, and strictly speaking, what has being in the world is of the order of things. If God were cause and also Being, He would have to be *causa sui*, and how could that be? It would be a contradiction.<sup>540</sup> God might be defined as the One conferring being since "the 'being' of God consists in giving being."<sup>541</sup> In any case, the classical and traditional concept of "act" is closer to the ultimate intuition of divine Reality than to the idea of being as substance or existence.

What we are trying here to clarify, and that Buddhism has expressed with different words, is not that God *is* silence, neither that His being *is* silence, but that the silence is the

<sup>538</sup> The problem of God's inaccessibility, beginning with Plato in the West (cf. *Timaeus* 28c) and developed by Patristics (cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes Theologicae* XXVII.4 [PG 36:32]), and by the Upaniṣads in the East (cf. BU II.4.13–14; III.4.12), seems to me to find a more profound explanation here than the one usually given.

<sup>539</sup> "Ideoque in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti unum confitemur Deum, quia [Deus] nomen est potestatis [...] non proprietatis" [And therefore in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit we confess one God, because [God] indicates a power and not a property] (*Fides Damasi*, in Denzinger and Schönmetzer [1967], §71).

<sup>540</sup> Obviously, the supreme cause cannot cause itself. This would involve an endless process, and this is precisely the classic Buddhist objection to the existence of God. A typical example: "If asked, 'How did Life begin?' [a Buddhist would ask in return], 'How did God begin?'" (Malalasekera; quoted in Glasenapp [1954], p. 33).

<sup>541</sup> "Sicut creatura habet esse suum, et suum esse sive sibi esse est accipere esse, sic deo esse est dare esse, quia universaliter ipsi agree sive operari est esse" [As the creature has its own being, and its being or being itself consists in receiving being, so for God being consists in giving being, because for God to act and to operate is always and only being] (Meister Eckhart, *Expositio Libri Genesis* II.2 [LW p. 1:299, §146]).

silence of being or, more simply, that silence is the "place" of God. Such "place," naturally empty, is, if you wish, the abyss of which the psalms speak,<sup>542</sup> the silence of the night before creation,<sup>543</sup> beyond being,<sup>544</sup> in the emptiness that neither is nor is not,<sup>545</sup> and from which, because of the strength of its spirit and thanks to the inner heat of its creative power,<sup>546</sup> reality draws its origin, according to more than one tradition.<sup>547</sup> In saying this, we do not wish to deny the distinction between God and what Christian theology calls "the created order."<sup>548</sup> The creature begins a process in time, but time does not exhaust reality.<sup>549</sup> The relationship between the temporal and the timeless dimensions remains unchanged: all things are equidistant from eternity.

The Buddha's silence, moreover, as we have said, is not only a liturgical silence, neither the mere fulfillment of a mystical path, although this aspect may be present; the Buddha agrees with other religions and schools of spirituality.<sup>550</sup> There are, in fact, various forms of silence that man can adopt when facing the Numinous, but we do not think this is the crucial aspect of the Awakened One's intuition.<sup>551</sup> It is obvious, in fact, that if the absence of thought and the silence of the mind are the necessary conditions to reach "God," it is because

<sup>542</sup> See Ps 41:8.

<sup>543</sup> See Wis 18:14 and its use in the Catholic liturgy (Latin Rite).

<sup>544</sup> Cf. Denis the Areopagite: "God transcends any being and any knowledge" (*De Divinis Nominibus* I [PG 3:588]), and "Since God is far beyond any affirmation or negation [of being]" (*De Mystica Theologia* I [PG 3:997 and passim]). Martin's translation (1990) tends to avoid formulations that may seem too paradoxical and should be complemented by others, such as Luibheid (1987), although the ideal thing would be to have the original at hand. Cf. for a general introduction Roques (1954): "God 'is not' (*De Divinis Nominibus* I [PG 3:688]) because He is beyond affirmation or negation (*De Mystica Theologia* I.5 [PG 3:1048]) and transcends any opposition between being and non-being" (*Epistulae* I and II [PG 3:1065, 1068–69]). As a Vedic testimony, see RV X.129.1, etc.

<sup>545</sup> Cf., as a Vedic testimony, RV X.129.3.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> The Vedic hymn cited above is one of the most complete expressions of what the Vedas, Hinduism, Christianity, and other religions have sought to say with their respective myths of the "birth of the Creator."

<sup>548</sup> Cf. the synthesis of the position of St. Gregory of Nyssa in Daniélou (1944): "Dieu et l'homme font également partie du monde intelligible. Or, l'esprit est de soi illimité. En ceci, Dieu et l'âme sont du même ordre. Mais la différence essentielle est que Dieu est infini en acte, tandis que l'âme est infinie en devenir. Sa divinité c'est de se transformer en Dieu" [God and man both belong to the intelligible world. Now, spirit is of itself unlimited. In this, God and the soul are of the same order. But the essential difference is that God is infinite in act, whereas the soul is infinite in becoming. Its divinity consists in being transformed into God] (p. 317).

<sup>549</sup> Cf. "Prima production sive emanatio Filii et Spiritus Sancti a Patre aeternaliter, item, production sive creatio generalis totius universi ab uno Deo temporaliter" [The first production or emanation of the Son and Holy Spirit from the Father is *eternal*; again, the general production or creation of the entire universe by one God is *in time*] (Meister Eckhart, *Liber Paraboliarum Genesis*, in Lossky [1960], p. 52 [emphasis added]); See also *Tabula Auctoritatum Libri Paraboliarum Genesis auctoritas* I.1 (LW 1457ff.).

<sup>550</sup> See the position of a Church Father such as Gregory of Nyssa: "La découverte de Dieu se fait bien moins dans une expérience définissable que dans la nécessité, de mieux en mieux perçue, de dépasser toute expérience" [The discovery of God is accomplished a good deal less in any definable experience than in the gradually perceived need to transcend all experience] (Bouyer [1960], p. 437). See also Casel (1919); Mensching (1926).

<sup>551</sup> Heiler (1961, pp. 334ff.) distinguishes a mythical silence of worship from a religious silence of worship, an ascetic silence from a contemplative one, and a theological silence from a metaphysical one.

there is nothing in Him that may be thought.<sup>552</sup> The Buddha does not theorize silence; he does not say, like Proclus, that the Logos needs silence to be established, a silence "before" Him.<sup>553</sup> Silence cannot be a new hypostasis.<sup>554</sup> The Buddha simply "distracts" man from his thinking activity to direct him exclusively toward his principal and unique task, to free himself from suffering, without leading him to speculate on the ineffable. To the Buddha the only thing that matters is that we reach our silence, the silence of the creature, the annihilation of creaturalty.<sup>555</sup> The rest is up to us.

The Buddha's "revelation" tells man to give up not only seeking God in order to know "how He may be," but also to give up God Himself as support in the path. If man seeks God, both intellectually and mystically, all his forces are directed outside of him toward a goal that distracts him from his real task: the destruction of his own contingency. There is no God on our path, and when the Mahāyana tradition (as many other mystical traditions of the world,<sup>556</sup> including the Jewish<sup>557</sup> and Christian traditions<sup>558</sup>) has the Buddha saying that he gives up *nirvāṇa* in order to save his brothers, it does so in a mystical spirit.<sup>559</sup> In fact, saying that because of God one must renounce God is not a way of contrasting the scruples of those who do not wish to renounce God and who wish to lean on Him to reach salvation without excessive effort. God cannot be a sort of catalyst that remains unaltered after the chemical reaction has taken place. Renouncing God is not a methodological operation, an intellectual exercise. To renounce God means renouncing any type of support (social, human, scientific,

<sup>552</sup> Plotinus even says, "A being that thinks itself is not a simple being" (*Enneadae* VI.7, §39).

<sup>553</sup> Δεῖ πρὸ τοῦ τῆν τὸν λόγον ὑποστήσασιν εἶναι σιγῇ [It is important for the Logos that the foundation of the Logos be silence], quoted in Heiler (1961), p. 339.

<sup>554</sup> The terms are reversed. To Philo, Plotinus, and Proclus, God is the ultimate hypostasis, above silence. To the Buddha, God is on this side of silence. See Heiler (1961), p. 338, for the classic texts.

<sup>555</sup> Consider, among thousands, one parable of Chuang-Tzu: "The emperor has lost a precious pearl. He dispatches Action, Word, and Thought in search of it, but without result. Then he sends Nothing and is astounded that Nothing succeeds in finding it." See Allers (1956), p. 144; Merton (1965), p. 74. Only the pacifying of all activity can allow us to rediscover truth. Cf. Mt 13:45–46, where we hear not of the loss of a pearl but of a quest for fine pearls (plural), and the discovery of one precious pearl (singular) whose price is everything. See also Prov 8:11; Wis 7:9.

<sup>556</sup> Cf., for example, the beautiful legend of King Vipascit as recounted in MP XIff., and particularly XV.59ff., according to which the king chose to stay in hell with his sinful friends rather than enter the heaven he had deserved. Cf. Winternitz (1920), pp. 1:469ff. According to other (probably later) versions, the gods, edified by the king's love and unable to leave him in hell, had to empty hell and send all its captives to heaven. Consider also Yudisthira, the hero of the MbBh, who, likewise, desired to go to hell in order to remain with his brothers. Cf. Papini's book (1967), so controversial in its time, which recounted a number of the more remarkable testimonials in Western tradition.

<sup>557</sup> See the decisive tone and anguished dilemma of the prophet of Israel when the people committed a mortal sin according to their own laws: "Moses turned to Yahweh and said, 'This people has committed a great sin; it has fashioned itself a god of gold. But now, if thou wouldst forgive [...]. Otherwise, erase me from the book that thou hast written' (Ex 32:31–32).

<sup>558</sup> Cf. "Indeed, I should wish to be anathema myself, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my relatives according to the flesh" (Rom 9:3).

<sup>559</sup> "Das Höchste und das Äusserste, was der Mensch lassen kann, das ist, dass er Gott um Gottes willen lasse. Nun liess Sankt Paulus Gott um Gottes willen . . . er liess alles, was er von Gott nehmen konnte, und liess alles, was Gott ihm geben konnte, und alles, was er von Gott empfangen konnte" [The highest and most courageous thing a person can do is renounce God for God's sake. St. Paul renounced God for God's sake—renounced everything he might have received from God, indeed everything God could give him, and everything that he could receive from God] (Meister Eckhart [1955], pp. 214–15).

or ideological). In short, it means leaping across to the other shore—a mortal somersault in which everything turns upside down and in which individual life is lost.

This is not, in fact, an exaggeration. Many contemporary atheists have reached the same conclusion. Yet, while to many of them, nothingness and loss of "eternal" life or of an immortal soul are the inevitable conclusion of the conscious erasing of God from their horizon, to the Buddhist the elimination of his own human existence, of suffering, of contingency, is what gives meaning to religious life.

I now come to the third and last part of this meditation, which I will introduce with a typical example:

If the *prajñāpāramitā* [i.e., the highest liberating wisdom] cannot be acquired or practiced, why does the ascetic seek it?

It is the last question of the lengthy work attributed to Nāgārjuna, which is lost in the original Sanskrit and preserved in its Chinese translation.<sup>560</sup>

Answer: The things that cannot be acquired are of two kinds. First, the pleasures of the world, which can be sought but do not correspond to expectations, cannot be acquired. Second, the true nature of the *dharma*, of which the known qualities escape perception, cannot be acquired. Since it is not nonexistent, it implies merit and wisdom and increases the roots of good. The uninitiated that speculate on human affairs, make money, and so forth, and the same could be applied to all good qualities. However, it is according to the spirit of the world that you may speak of acquisition. According to the spirit of the Buddha, nothing is acquired.<sup>561</sup>

### *Liberation*

The lesson that contemporary man could draw from the Buddha's message can perhaps be summed up in three points.

1. There is no Supreme Entity, no supernatural Monarch, a projection on the absolute of the Imperial ideology that has dominated the whole of history. Buddha is not a *monotheist*.
2. If God is not a Supreme Entity, neither is Being that *reality* that is simply everything. Buddha is not a *pantheist*.
3. Reality has a dimension of mystery, of silence, of pure transcendence—which is discovered only in the immanence of that suffering that must be eliminated. Buddha is not an *atheist*.

In other words, we cannot think God, we cannot weigh Him, consider Him, place Him in the pan of a balance that allows us to refer Him to something else more immediately known. We cannot in any way "fit" God into a category or classification. God escapes our thinking. He cannot be thought. He is further on, some would say. Or further here, others might say. Transcendence or immanence.

We can, it seems, believe in Him. We can address Him, or even give Him our hearts, as the Word suggests. And we can be aware of this movement of the heart without transforming

<sup>560</sup> See Lamotte's translation (Nāgārjuna [1966–1969]). It would make little difference for our purposes if this monumental work is not directly from the hand of Nāgārjuna, as more recent criticism is inclined to hold.

<sup>561</sup> See Nāgārjuna (1966–1969), pp. 2:1112–13.

it into an object of our mind and our will. Faith does not have an object. It would be idolatry. The ancients already knew this:

Without authentic virtue, any discourse on God is a [mere] name.<sup>562</sup>

This has been our hermeneutic. Śākyamuni, however, is more discreet, more coherent, more prudent. He does not use our terms and does not speak of God even to say that God corresponds to Silence or that He is the unfathomable abyss of Nothingness, but he speaks of man. And if we have tried to interpret silence by transferring it to God, by taking a direct interest in the issue of God, we have done so because in our predicament, after millennia of history, we can no longer preserve that innocence that Siddhārtha wished for us. In fact, the problem of God has occupied for centuries a central place not only in the life but in the thinking of peoples, and it would be questionable at least if we now refused to mention it. This is why we have spoken of silence and have chosen to qualify it as silence of God, silence in God, whereas the Tathāgata would speak of man, of silence in man.

The Awakened One refused to let himself be drawn into philosophical and theological disputes. He preferred to draw man to silence, help him to be quiet, and lead him to know his human condition. The consequence is a constant reference to suffering as the deepest and most essential experience of man. The Buddha wants to lead man step by step in the elimination of the suffering that he is steeped in and that he encounters at every step of the way. Compassion for man, surrounded, soaked, as it were, in pain is what brings the Awakened One to seek only the way to free him from this pain, so that man occupied in the practical and immediate task of freeing himself from what makes him suffer may forget about himself, his *ātman*, and even about the problem of God. If, then, in this process of elimination of suffering (which at times is manifest in a concentration on the curing of the body's ailments),<sup>563</sup> man discovers that in order to manage it he must eliminate his own contingency, the Buddha will only rejoice in this, because it is the idea of thinking of oneself as a subject, an *ātman*, a concrete individual, immortal and with an immortal destiny that causes suffering and its renewal.

What matters, then, is not God, in the classical sense of the word, but the path, the way leading to liberation. Ultimately, the destiny of man is in his own hands—when the hands are no longer his, but simply hands. Only man can free himself from the pain that surrounds him. His only help is the support offered by his experience, stimulated by the Buddha's own, by the community and by right action. This is what is traditionally known as finding refuge in the three jewels: Buddha, *dharma*, *saṃgha*. Nothing else must worry him. Not even *nirvāṇa* can be the object of his care or his investigation.

But then, many asked him, can it be said that neither the *nirvāṇa* nor nothingness exist? "Not so, not so," answers the Buddha. "How can that be?" And Gautama answers, "Because the practice of the *dharma* is not sterile."<sup>564</sup> Ultimately, neither *orthodoxy* nor *orthopoesis* matter; an ideology or a philosophy that are more or less centered on God are not what saves. What matters, what leads us beyond the here and now, is *orthopraxis*, which allows us to

<sup>562</sup> "Ανευ δὲ ἀρετῆς ἀληθινῆς θεὸς λεγόμενος ὄνομα ἐστίν," MacKenna translates: "God" on the lips without a good conduct of life, is a word" (Plotinus, *Enneades* II.9, §15, 40).

<sup>563</sup> Many of the practical exercises of meditation have as their immediate aim the health of the body, which at first might appear as a utilitarian goal and an affirmation of matter rather than its negation. Meditation and medicine share the same root —*med*.

<sup>564</sup> Cf. VisMag XVI.507–9, according to the translation by Homer, in Conze (1964), p. 100—although, as W. C. Smith notes (1966, p. 30), the word *dhamma* does not occur in the original, which reads *paṭipattiya vañjhabhavapajjanato*.

"arrive" without throwing us at the mercy of a transcendence that can be manipulated or be the result of our unsatisfied desires. The *dharma*, in itself, is not sterile. It is enough to follow it without worrying through reflection or willpower; it is enough to listen to the Buddha who has shown the way, to live in the (monastic) community, that is, in reciprocal solidarity.

The Buddha has not declared God, neither has he denied Him (although he defends himself more against this latter charge than against the former). Neither does the Buddha claim to be able to satisfy our speculative research; his intention is to prevent our desire to question ourselves about God, not because we are so inebriated with transitory things that we have no longer any need to turn to Him, but because at the end of the process of elimination of suffering, we shall have silenced our own being and discovered his nullity.

For the Buddha, however, reducing man to silence does not mean destroying him; on the contrary, it means "liberating" him. By making it possible for man to recognize his nullity, not through philosophical dissertation but through a concrete experience, the Buddha frees him from any yoke and from any external influence. To reduce man to silence means not only liberating him from internal and external noise, but also giving him peace and reconciling him with all those factors that interfere with his center of gravity.

The Buddha is silent about God and silences our impatience and our curiosity toward what intrinsically terrifies us. God cannot represent any threat, nor can He appear as the enemy of man, yet, ultimately, He terrifies because despite all our efforts to know him rationally, He remains obscure, unknown, incomprehensible, and mysterious. In choosing not to consider God in his path to salvation, Śākyamuni opens the doors to freedom—freedom that is primarily liberation from any fear and liberation from any limitation—and therefore even from ourselves.

Many times, the humanist reaction to a certain divine *heteronomy* that oppressed man with a false fear of God has led man to fall—in his attempts at liberation—in the opposite extreme of a would-be *independence* of the human being, which transforms him into a slave of ego and turns him into a victim of the high opinion he has formed of himself. The Buddha suggests the *middle path*, which we shall call *ontonomic*, to free man both from the apotheosis of an external God and from making the human absolute. The *middle path* does not admit either making the absolute relative nor making the relative absolute, hence the sense of freedom its message gives.

Here I shall quote, if only in part, a delightful text:<sup>565</sup>

"What, O lady, is the counterpart of ignorance?"

"Knowledge, O friend Visakha, is the counterpart of ignorance."

"And what, O lady, is the counterpart of knowledge?"

"Freedom, O friend Visakha, is the counterpart of knowledge."

"And what, O lady, is the counterpart of freedom?"

"*Nibbāna*, O friend Visakha, is the counterpart of freedom."<sup>566</sup>

<sup>565</sup> From the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta*, or dialogue between the nun Dhammadinna and a lay disciple, Visakha, who had previously been her husband. Therefore, not only does the nun impart a teaching to the lay man but the wife instructs the husband. The Buddha himself, at the end of the speech, confirms the teaching of Dhammadinna, declaring that he would have said the same.

<sup>566</sup> MN I.304. The key word in this case is *paṭibhaga*, composed from *paṭi* and *bhaga*. The undeclinable prefix *paṭi* (from the root *preti-* [see the Latin *pretium*, "price," "precious"] and the Greek *πρός*) holds meanings such as direction, tendency, opposition, correspondence, toward, near to, etc. It appears in hundreds of compound names. *Bhaga* means portion, part, fraction. *Paṭibhaga*, on the other hand, has an almost literal translation as it means the concounterpart, the complementary, opposite side.

Nevertheless, the Awakened One does not tell us that Man is "free *for*" something, thus imprisoning his freedom and putting it at the service of a superior ideal that would immediately suppress human liberty. The purpose of his preaching is to set man free *from* everything—from an objectified God, an idealized humanity, a programmed Society, the dreams of Science, and so on—and aims at a deeper freedom that has nothing to do with whim or anarchy. It is a total liberation of man, both from external compulsions and from inner willfulness. Free in all.

The religious, mystical, and even sociological implications, as much as other practical consequences, seem obvious to us; we leave them open, therefore, so as not to betray the deep and wise silence of the Awakened One to which we will now return.

Then the Blessed One addressed the brothers and told them,

"Perhaps, brethren, there can be doubt or lack of trust in the mind of some monks toward the Buddha, the truth, the path, or the means. Ask, brethren, do not hesitate, that you may not later regret, thinking, 'Our Master was with us and we did not dare ask him explanations while we were with him.'"

And when he had thus spoken the brothers remained silent.

Again, a second and a third time the Blessed One addressed the brothers and told them,

"Perhaps, monks, there is some doubt or lack of trust in the mind of some monks toward the Buddha, the truth, the path, or the means. Ask, brethren, do not hesitate, that you may not later regret, thinking, 'Our Master was with us and we did not dare ask him explanations while we were with him.'"

And when he had thus spoken the brothers remained silent.

Then the Blessed One addressed the brothers and told them,

"Perhaps, brothers, you do not ask any question out of a sort of reverence toward the Teacher. Let friends communicate one with another."

And when he had said these things, the brothers remained silent.<sup>567</sup>

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It can also mean correspondence, analogy (complementarity).

<sup>567</sup> MhpamibS VI.5–7. As Masson pointed out, the monks later repented of having asked the Buddha nothing, and, as tradition narrates, a discussion ensued on the possible abrogation of the minor rules. Casuistry and charter are also human. Augustine speaks paradoxically of the "silence of truth" ("quoddam silentium veritatis illabitur, aliam beatam vitam quaerimus, et tam certa et praesente non fruimur?"; *De libero arbitrio* II.13.35 [PL 32:1260]), and of the fact that in silence there is truth, echoing Jesus's example in Jn 18:38.

## EPILOGUE

### *The Radical Contingency*

Adding an *epi-logos* to a book that professes to transcend *logos* might appear as somewhat of an oxymoron, but even the Buddha did not refuse to speak despite his belief that the ultimate reality is ineffable—as practically all teachers, including scientists, have sustained. Moreover, this *epi-logos* might have a meaning that goes beyond *logos*.<sup>1</sup>

If I had to sum up in words this Buddhist ineffability for the Western reader, therefore, I would say that the term “radical contingency” might effectively express its basic intuition.

A part of Man’s universal experience is the awareness that the human condition is contingent. In other words, all beings are conjointly touched (*cum-tangere*), at one single dimensionless point, by the vastness of Reality, the Mystery, *nirvāṇa*. And since this point is without the dimension of speech, it is also a silent point. Therefore, the rational dialectic (which is so cultivated by certain Buddhist schools) can only serve to bring us to a (rationally contradictory) place from where we can make the leap to enlightenment (to use Buddhist language). I gave an explicit example of this in the chapter on *avyākṛtavastūni*, although in all my affirmations, contingency has been considered.

If everything is contingent, then truth itself is also, which means that there are no absolute, uncreated truths, no *veritates aeternae*.<sup>2</sup> Hence there is no world of need to which a monotheistic God must also submit. If God is the Absolute there are no *veritates emanipatae a Deo*. This contradicts the scholastic *dictum* that divine omnipotence has no power over the principle of noncontradiction, which is superior to God.<sup>3</sup>

In this case, says the rational mind, if thought does not reveal to us what things are, we cannot trust it. This contradicts the “dogma” of Parmenides, which for twenty-five centuries has dominated the larger part of Western culture, including Christianity. The consequence (not immediate but logical) is that in order to think properly (and thus also to live), we have no need for God. The result of this is contemporary atheism. Paradoxically, the Buddha criticizes this way of thinking in which Thought becomes the master of Being. This does not mean defending irrationality, the logical conclusion of dialectical thinking: either A or not-A. Reality, in fact, is not required to follow the (dialectical) rules of thought. The Reality to which reason makes us receptive cannot be fully embraced by the mere thought of it, as is explicitly pointed out in Buddhism and all mysticism. Contradiction rules out “diction,” which implies a pretension to truth; reality is free and superior to thought—impermanent, as the Buddha tells us. It is important to emphasize that irrationalism is not the only alternative to rationalism, because the human mind is not only rational. Faith is

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<sup>1</sup> The old prefix *epi*, of Indo-European origin, can mean above, against, according to a specific meaning, toward, *beyond*, but not necessarily after.

<sup>2</sup> There is no *intellectus separatus*. Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* III.5 (430a18).

<sup>3</sup> “. . . sub omnipotentia Dei non cadit aliquid quod contradictionem implicat” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [I, q.25, a.4], which, in *Quaestiones de quodlibet* V, q.2, a.1, he explains as follows: “Solum id a Dei potentia excluditur quod repugnat rationi entis: et hoc est simul esse et non esse: et eiusdem rationis est, quod fuit, non fuisse.” This is well developed in Schestow (1994), pp. 330ff. (and p. 434).



also a form of knowledge, which, while it is not contrary to reason—a tool that is essential to Man—it does not allow itself to be overwhelmed by it, and this also applies to the knowledge that comes from the senses. This is the tripartite anthropology that I have talked about. Such an approach is not contrary to rationality, but rather it recognizes its contingency. As I have said, this way of thinking has been adopted by the majority of Western culture, although there are exceptions. Pier Damiani in the Middle Ages and Tertullian in ancient times are famous examples, and tend to be misunderstood by modern philosophers and theologians. This was the direction followed (with various degrees of explicitness) by the Scholastic trends of the later Romantic movements.<sup>4</sup>

The aporias and contradictions of Buddhist logic, as mentioned above, are aimed at bringing about the leap to the other shore. As I have attempted to explain, Buddhism represents another way of thinking, and the fact that it is taking root in the West is very positive for both sides.

Now perhaps the irony of our subtitle is clearer. Religious atheism is isolation and solitude; Man must “make his own way.” Buddhism, on the other hand, is pure relatedness (*pratityasamutpāda*), and in this sense it represents just the opposite. As we have said, however, strictly speaking, so-called atheism is antimonotheism. A side benefit of the Buddhist religion could be to harmonize (without confusing them) these two great cultures of mankind.

Milarupa, 2006

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<sup>4</sup> Pier Damiani, for example, writes: “Qui naturae dedit originem, facile, cum vult, naturae tollit necessitatem” [He who brought *nature* into being, at will easily abrogates the necessity of *nature*], cited in Schestow (1994), p. 344. Moreover, the preeminence of the latent will also betray (so to speak) another characteristic of the West.

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## GLOSSARY

*All terms are Sanskrit unless otherwise specified.*

*abhāva*: nonexistence.

*advaita*: a-dualism (*a-dvaita*). Spiritual intuition that sees ultimate reality as neither monistic nor dualistic. The recognition that the merely quantitative problem of the one and the many in dialectical reasoning does not apply to the realm of ultimate reality. The latter, in fact, possesses polarities that cannot be divided into multiple separate units; not to be confused with monism.

*advaya*: absolute unity, nonduality; single, without a second, unique.

*Agni*: the sacrificial fire and the Divine Fire, one of the most important Gods or divine manifestations, the mediator or priest for Men and Gods.

*agnihotra*: the daily fire sacrifice performed morning and evening in all homes of the high castes, which consists of an oblation of milk sprinkled on the fire.

*ahambrahmāsmi*: "I am *brahman*," a *mahavakya* that expresses the identity *ātman-brahman*.

*alaya*: home, receptacle, deposit.

*ānanda*: joy, bliss (cf. *sukha*), the delights of love, and especially the highest spiritual bliss; *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda* represent three possible attempts at defining *brahman* or absolute reality.

*anātman*: absence of *ātman*, of the substantiality of an individual ontological Self.

*anātmavāda*: mainly Buddhist doctrine of the insubstantiality of the *ātman* or Self.

*anattā* (Pāli): cf. *anatman*.

*anicca* (Sansk. *anitya*): impermanence.

*anubhava*: direct experience, knowledge deriving from immediate spiritual intuition.

*anupādāya* (Pāli): unconditioned.

*aparokṣa*: immediate perceptibility.

*arhat*: ascetic, saint, the highest and most noble figure of Theravāda Buddhism.

*arhatva*: holiness.

*āriya* (Pāli, Sansk. *ārya*): a noble disciple; noble par excellence.

*āriya-sāccāni* (Pāli, Sansk. *ārya-satyāni*): the Noble Truths (traditionally four in number) that summarize the teachings of Buddha.

*asaṃskṛta*: lit. "unconditioned, unformed."

*asat*: non-being; denial of being; as opposed to *sat*, being.

*Aśoka*: name of an important king of India, who promoted Buddhism and other religious observances of his time.

*āstika*: theistic position that affirms that "it exists."

*astitva*: existence, reality.

*atta* (Pāli, Sansk. *ātman*): principle of life, breath, the body, the Self (from the root *an*, to breathe). Refers to the whole, undivided person and also to the innermost center of man, his incorruptible nucleus, which in the *Upaniṣad* is shown to be identical

to Brahman. The Self or inner essence of the universe and man. Ontological center in Hinduism, which is negated in Buddhism.

*attha-gamo* (Pāli): disappearance.

*avatāra*: "descent" of the divine (from *ava-tṛ*, descend), the "incarnations" of Viṣṇu in various animal and human forms. Traditionally, there are ten *avatāra*: *matsya* (the fish), *kūrma* (the tortoise), *varāha* (the wild boar), *narasiṃha* (the lion-man), *vāmana* (the dwarf), Paraśurāma (Rama with the axe), Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, and Kalkin at the end of time. In general, any personal manifestation of the Divinity, descended into this world in human form; descent as antonomasia.

*avatavāda*: eternalist theory as antonomasia.

*avijjā* (Pāli, Sansk. *avidyā*): ignorance, nescience, absence of true and liberating knowledge, often identified with *māyā* and a cause of illusion and delusion.

*avyākṛta*: lit. "inexpressible things," the silence of Buddha in the face of metaphysical and eschatological questions.

*bhakti*: devotion, submission, love for God, personal relationship with God, devotional mysticism. One of the paths of salvation through union with the divinity.

*bhikku* (Pāli, Sansk. *bhikṣu*): he who begs for food and leaves home, the monk.

*bodhisattva*: the enlightened one. In particular, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, he who, having attained liberation on earth, makes a vow to help all other beings attain liberation before they enter *nirvāṇa*.

*brahmā-jijñāsa*: noun deriving from the desiderative of the root *jñā* [to know]. [*jñāna*]: the desire to know *brahman*, longing for the realization of *brahman*.

*brāhmaṇa*: priest, brahmin, member of the priestly class; being pure, knowing Brahman. Also a collection of writings added to the *Saṃhitā*, which deal with ritual and mythical subjects.

*Brahmā-vihāra*: lit. "permanent divine states"; positive spiritual attitudes reawakened in the faithful during meditation exercises. There are four: infinite goodness, infinite compassion, infinite joy, and infinite impassibility.

*catuṣkoṭi*: lit. "the four arguments," the dialectical arguments of so-called logical-epistemological Buddhism, best known in the interpretation of "fourfold negation."

*cit*: root noun (from the root *cit-*, to perceive, to comprehend, etc.), meaning "consciousness, intelligence." One of the three "characteristics" of Brahman (cf. *sat*, *ānanda*).

*deva*: connected with *div*, sky, light (Lat. *divus*, *deus*), celestial, divine. Also God, divinity, heavenly being, cosmic power. The *deva* are not on the same level as the one God (sometimes called also *deva*, in the sing., or *īśvara*) or the absolute (Brahman). They are powers that have different functions in the cosmos. Subsequently, the human sensory faculties are also called *deva* in the *Upaniṣad*.

*devatā*: Godhead.

*dhamma* (Pāli, Sansk. *dharma*): cosmic order, justice, duty, religious law, religious and social observances transmitted by tradition; "religion" as a collection of practices and laws. That which holds the world together. One of the four "human purposes."

*dhvani*: connotation, allusion, poetic style.

*duḥkha*: disquieted, un-easy, distress, pain, suffering, anguish (lit. "having a poor axle hole," i.e., that which does not turn smoothly), a basic concept in Buddhism and Hinduism. Opposite of *sukha*.

*Ersatz* (Ger.): substitute.

*Gautama*: family name of prince Siddhārta, who became the Buddha.

*hubris* (Gr.): lit. overconfidence, excessive pride, arrogance.

*Īśa, Īśvara*: the Lord, from the root *īś-*, to be lord, to guide, to possess. Although a generic term for Lord, in posterior religious systems it is more often used for Śiva than for Viṣṇu. In the Vedānta it is the manifested, qualified (*sagūṇa*) aspect of Brahman.

*iṣṭadevatā (iṣṭadevu)*: the tangible symbol of the divine, the personal form of God, in worship and meditation; the icon of the divine that best corresponds to the culture, idiosyncrasy, and circumstances of each person or group; the concrete symbol through which the ultimate mystery is experienced.

*jati*: birth.

*jñāna*: knowledge (from the root *jñā-*, to know), intuition, wisdom; frequently the highest intuitive comprehension, the attaining of *ātman* or *brahman*. *Jñāna* is the result of meditation or revelation.

*kalpa*: a period of the world, a cosmic time of variable length.

*kamma* (Pāli, Sansk. *karma*): lit. "act, deed, action," from the root *kr*, to act, to do; originally the sacred action, sacrifice, rite, later also moral act. The result of all actions and deeds according to the law of *karman* that regulates actions and their results in the universe. Later also connected with rebirth, it indicates the link between the actions carried out by a subject and his destiny in the cycle of deaths and rebirths.

*karma-mārga*: the path of action; one of the three classic paths of spirituality (cf. *bhakti*, *jñāna*). In the *Vedas* it refers to sacrificial actions viewed as the way to salvation; later includes also moral actions, or all actions that are performed in a spirit of sacrifice.

*karuṇā*: comprehension and compassion; an important concept in Buddhism.

*katachronism*: interpretation of a reality or doctrine with categories that are extraneous or posterior.

*kāya*: body.

*khaṇḍha* (Pāli, Sansk. *skandha*): the five aggregates that include all the physical and mental phenomena of conditioned existence.

*kṣātriya*: member of the second caste (*varṇa*), which includes kings, warriors, and aristocrats.

*lakṣaṇa*: sign.

*logos* (Gr.): word, thought, judgment, reason. In the New Testament, Christ as the word of God (Jn 1).

*mādhyamika*: the school of the "middle way" in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

*magga* (Pāli, Sansk. *mārga*): road, path, way.

*Mahābhārata*: epic poem that tells the legendary story of the Indian people and expounds its prescriptive values.

*mahāparinirvāṇa*: great and final *nirvāṇa*.

*Maitreya*: a successor to the present Buddha, who will appear on Earth in the future, achieve complete enlightenment, and teach the pure dharma.

*Maitreyī*: wife of the sage Yājñavalkya. Was considered a "knower of Brahman."

*manas*: mind in its broadest sense, heart, intellect, the internal organ that is the seat of thought, comprehension, feeling, imagination, and will. In Upaniṣadic anthropology, *manas* is one of the three constituent principles of man.

*mīmāṃsā*, *mīmāṃsaka*: one of the six classic systems of Indian philosophy that deals mainly with the rudiments and the rules for interpreting the Vedic writings. From the root *man-*, to think. The two main schools are the *pūrvamīmāṃsā*, which focuses on the ritual interpretation of the *Veda*, and the *uttaramīmāṃsā*, which gives a philosophical and spiritual interpretation.

*mokṣa*: ultimate liberation from *saṃsāra*, the cycle of births and deaths, and from *karman*, ignorance and limitation: salvation. Homeomorphic equivalent of *sōteria*. *Plerōma*

*monism*: from Gr. *monon*, unique; concept by which all things are traced back to a single active principle.

*muditā*: joy experienced through the happiness and well-being of others.

*muni*: a silent monk, ascetic; an ecstatic. One who practices *mauna*, silence.

*nairātmyavāda*: the theory of the denial of *ātman*, the self, the soul; radical unthinkability of the origin; see also *anātmavāda*.

*nāma-rūpa*: name and form, mind and matter.

*nāstika*: nontheist, atheist position or person.

*nibbāna* (Pāli, Sansk. *nirvāṇa*): lit. "the going out (of the flame)," extinction. The word does not refer to a condition, but indicates liberation from all dichotomy and conditioning, whether it be birth and death, time and space, being and non-being, ignorance and knowledge, or final extinction including time, space, and being; the ultimate destination for Buddhism and Jainism.

*nirodha*: halt, destruction.

*nirvikalpa*: certain, beyond doubt.

*ontonomy*: intrinsic connection of an entity in relation to the totality of Being, the constitutive order (*nomos*) of every being as Being (*on*), harmony that allows the interdependence of all things.

*orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy*: "correct doctrine" and "correct action."

*para*: the other side, the other shore.

*paramārtha*: supreme, absolute, unconditional Reality.

*paramparā*: the uninterrupted tradition of oral religious instruction through a series of teachers.

*parinirvāṇa*: the complete absorption of the conscious reflection of an entity into universal consciousness; the quenching of a thirst for formal life; the rediscovery of pure Consciousness having neither object nor attributes.

*parousia* (Gr.): the return, the presence, the second coming of Christ.

*pascha* (Lat.): passage, passover.

*paṭiccasamuppāda* (Pāli, Sansk. *pratityasamutpāda*): Buddhist doctrine of the "conditioned genesis" or "dependent origination," which claims that nothing exists for itself but carries within itself the conditions for its own existence, and that everything is mutually conditioned in the cycle of existence.

*plerōma* (Gr.): fullness, the full, complete.

*prahāṇa*: abandonment, detachment.

*Prajāpati*: "Lord of creatures," the primordial God, Father of the Gods and all beings. His position is central in the *Brāhmaṇa*.

*prajñā*: understanding and awareness, consciousness, wisdom.

*prapañcopaśama*: composed of *upaśama*, meaning "to cease" (from *upa* and the root *śam* [calm,

pacification, tranquility, peace]) and *prapañca* (from *pra* and the root *pañc*: from *pac* [to cook, to mature]). The cessation of all manifestation, development, evolution.

*pūrṇa*: Fullness, Infinite as Fullness.

*Puruṣa*: the Person, the spirit, man. Both the primordial man of the cosmic dimension (*R̥g-veda*) and the "inner man," the spiritual person existing within man (*Upaniṣad*). In the Sāṃkhya it is the spiritual principle of reality.

*ṛṣi*: seer, sage, wise man; the poet-sages to whom the *Vedas* were revealed. Regarded as a special class of beings, superior to men and inferior to the Gods. According to one tradition there were seven *ṛṣi*, probably the seven priests with whom Manu performed the first sacrifice and the seven poet judges in the assembly. Their identification with the names of ancient seers and with the stars of the Ursa Major occurred later (*Brahmaṇa*).

*sākṣaḥ*: with the eyes, before one's eyes, evidently, in person.

*samādhi*: state of deep concentration, compenetration, immersion, perfection (enstasy); the last of the yoga stages; also the tomb of a saint.

*saṃgha*: the (monastic) community of those who follow the path of the Buddha.

*saṃnyāsin*: renunciant, ascetic; pertaining to the fourth stage or period of life (*āśrama*), to some the superior stage.

*saṃpradāya*: tradition; religious system and community that follows a tradition.

*saṃsāra*: the impermanent phenomenic world and the condition of identification with it, the temporal existence, the cycle of births and deaths, of conditioned existences; state of dependence and slavery.

*saṃskāra*: "sacrament," rites that sanctify the various important stages and events in human life. Also karmic residues, physical impressions left over from previous lives, which in some way influence a person's individual existence.

*saṃskṛta*: integrated, packaged, composed, configured.

*śānta*: totally pacified, perfectly quiet. Refers to the state of the Self.

*sat*: essence (pres. part. of *as-*, to be), existence, reality. Ultimately, only the Brahman is *sat*, as pure Being is the Foundation of all existence. In the Vedānta one of the three "qualifications" of the Brahman (cf. *cit*, *ananda*).

*satsaṅga*: retreat, hermitage to which, after having passed the first two stages of life and fulfilled the relative obligations, one retires to a life of total renunciation for the purpose of contemplating Absolute Reality (*sat*); company of truth-seekers.

*siddhi*: perfection, perfect capacity or faculty. Psychic powers that may appear as a by-product of spiritual development.

*śruti*: "that which has been heard," the Vedic Revelation, an expression mainly used in sacred texts, *Veda* and other authoritative Hindū scriptures, which reveal to the human spirit the entire *corpus* of the *Veda* transmitted orally.

*stūpa*: sacred place or sacred mountain in Buddhism.

*sukha*: happiness, pleasure, joy, bliss.

*sunna* (Pāli, Sansk. *śūnya*, *śūnyatā*): void, vacuity, nothingness, the structural condition of reality and all things; represents the ultimate reality in Buddhism (cf. *nibbāna*).

*sutta* (Pāli, Sansk. *sūtra*): lit. "yarn, thread of a fabric." Short aphorism in a sacred text that generally cannot be understood without a comment (*bhāṣya*). The literature of the *sutra* is part of the *smṛti* and is conceived to be easily memorized.

*svayamprakāśa*, *svaprakāśa*: "self-enlightening."

*taṇhā* (Pāli, Sansk. *tṛṣṇā*): thirst; thirst for existence; origin of all suffering, according to Buddhism.

*tapas*: lit. heat; hence inner energy, spiritual fervor or ardor, austerity, asceticism, penitence. One of the forms of primordial energy, along with *kāma*.

*Tathāgata*: lit. "the one thus come, who has attained being, who has extinguished himself," an appellation of Buddha.

*tempiternity*: nonseparation between time and eternity.

*ucchedavāda*: nihilistic theory.

*udaya*: origin.

*upekkhā* (Pāli, Sansk. *upekṣā*): equanimity, detachment, kindness.

*vāyu*: air, wind, personified as a God in the *Veda*.

*vedanā*: sensation, feeling.

*vidyā*: knowledge, wisdom, also branch of knowledge; a section of a text in the *Upaniṣad*.

*vijñāna*: knowledge gained from experience, critical knowledge.

*vyaya*: decay.

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An international authority on spirituality, the study of religions, and intercultural dialogue, Raimon Panikkar has made intercultural and dialogical pluralism one of the hallmarks of his research, becoming a master "bridge builder," tireless in the promotion of dialogue between Western culture and the great Oriental Hindū and Buddhist traditions.

Born in 1918 in Barcelona of a Spanish Catholic mother and an Indian Hindū father, he is part of a plurality of traditions: Indian and European, Hindū and Christian, scientific and humanistic.

Panikkar holds degrees in chemistry, philosophy, and theology, and was ordained a Catholic priest in 1946. He has delivered courses and lectures in major European, Indian, and American universities.

A member of the International Institute of Philosophy (Paris), of the permanent Tribunal of the Peoples (Rome), and of the UNESCO Commission for intercultural dialogue, he has also founded various philosophical journals and intercultural study centers. He has held conferences in each of the five continents (including the renowned Gifford Lectures in 1988–1989 on "Trinity and Atheism").

Panikkar has received international recognitions including honorary doctorates from the University of the Balearic Islands in 1997, the University of Tübingen in 2004, Urbino in 2005, and Girona in 2008, as well as prizes ranging from the "Premio Menéndez Pelayo de Humanidades" for his book *El concepto de naturaleza* in Madrid in 1946 to the "Premio Nonino 2001 a un maestro del nostro tempo" in Italy.

Since 1982 he has lived in Tavertet in the Catalanian mountains, where he continues his contemplative experience and cultural activities. There he founded and presides over the intercultural study center Vivarium. Panikkar has published more than fifty books in various languages and hundreds of articles on the philosophy of religion, theology, the philosophy of science, metaphysics, and Indology.

From the dialogue between religions to the peaceful cohabitation of peoples; from reflections on the future of the technological society to major work on political and social intelligence; from the recognition that all interreligious dialogue is based on an intrareligious dialogue to the promotion of open knowledge of other religions, of which he is a mediator; from his penetrating analysis of the crisis in spirituality to the practice of meditation and the rediscovery of his monastic identity; from the invitation of *colligite fragmenta* as a path toward the integration of reality to the proposal of a new innocence, Panikkar embodies a personal journey of fulfillment.

Among his most important publications with Orbis are: *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (1973); *Worship and Secular Man* (1973); *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1981); *The Silence of God* (1989); *The Rythym of Being* (1989); *Cosmotheandric Experience* (1993); *Christophany* (2004).